

LAND FIT FOR 'ETROS



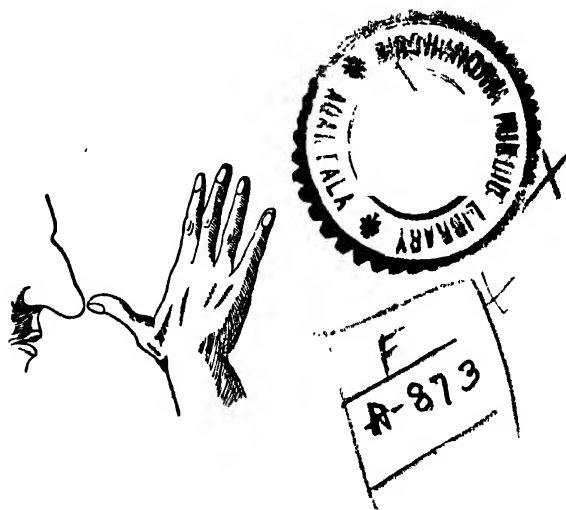
by John Atkins and J. B. Pick

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JOHN ATKINS and J. B. PICK



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DEDICATION

To all those authors whose works repelled us sufficiently for the recoil to produce this sad rash of barbarous jokelets;

To Elbo Detritus, the doyen of existentialist bootblacks;

To Hilda de Piggledy, without whose loyal help we should have been much happier;

To that mysterious ghost who boils in the cold recesses of its sour container all these dark, devoted whims;

To Leggy Mermondrello, Leppy Doptera and Flange Bucket;

To those Fiends whose incalculable explosions of irrelevance bring into our lives their only joy;

To Green Greene-Greene, the Grand Old Man of Angst;

To the Great Umpire, in the hope that he will refrain from raising his awful finger until we have fully enjoyed the fame and fortune which this intrepid gallimaufry must inevitably bring us;

and finally

• To Bernard Hanison, to whom Literature will forever remain in debt.

We have, on the one hand, the polytheistic ritualism of the *Veda* and the *Brahmana* and the monistic idealism of the *Upanishad*; but all this is coloured by the naturalistic dualism of the proto-*Samkhya* and the disciplinary deism of the proto-*Yoga*, although much of it, it must be admitted, is neither the *Samkhya* nor the *Yoga*. On the other hand, we have the monotheistic devotionism of the *Pasupatas*, the *Vaisnavas*, the *Navayanias* and the more important *Bhagavatas*, which derives its speculative ideas from diverse sources. . . .

History of Philosophy, Eastern and Western.

If a person is found hanging, loosen the cord, or whatever it may be by which the person has been suspended. Open the temporal artery or jugular vein, or bleed from the arm; employ electricity, if at hand, and proceed as for drowning, taking the additional precaution to apply eight or ten leeches to the temples. .

Enquire Within Upon Everything.

Damp injures them not, except by lessening the cement with which they are fastened to the wall.

Thomas Hodgkin, "Theodoric."

Mighty few men ever drowned in their own sweat.

Cowboy Proverb.

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CHAPTER ONE

*In which two English gentlemen
suffer sundry indignities*

ON A DULL evening in March the traffic of London was fumbling gearily from jam to marmalade. Motorists, held up for weeks, were arrested and deported (by helicopter) for driving without current licences. Dead drivers sprawled behind rusted steering-wheels, wearing expressions of beatific implausibility. In the cafés the milk turned sour, and mildewed diners lolled in helpless apathy—or if they were South Africans in helpless *apartheid*, which is worse. TV sets, plastic footballs, National Health teeth, leeks, copies of *Hansard*, medical ampoules, hollow eggs, smog masks, pamphlets on nutrition, yoghourt and other necessities remained undelivered. The only objects delivered were babies, many of which attempted to resist deliverance—or liberation as it is known in political circles—but failed, owing to the prompt intervention of medical science.

The cause of this trafficationary indigestion was the imminent arrival at the London Pandemonium of those two spine-tingling, rib-tickling, breath-stealing, heart-exploding American laugh-moguls, uproarious Earle Slezzy and rum-bustious Mugs Cormorant. Their hilarious barnstorming antics had engulfed with wave upon wave of laughter the entire population of London (more easily engulfed than the slow-witted inhabitants of the ugly, industrial provinces, who want a comedian to be funny before they'll laugh). And this, mind you, merely from the screen. Cinema-going bishops

had been reduced to rumbly burbles by their ear-splitting yells (you should hear Mugs bawl out "I'll be doggone!") It's enough to stun a deaf tortoise); schoolmistresses had been laid end to end along the aisles frittery with sniggers by their amazing contortions (you should see Earle with his ears inside out—it's enough to desiccate a drunk coconut). Three Dee had brought them even closer to their fawning fans: Mugs had breathed spearmint down a Cabinet Minister's collar, Earle had squeezed bāy rum in Lady Astor's eye. Yippee! Haroo! was the universal verdict. And now they were due to appear in person, in the flesh, in London, in the Pandemonium! Taree! Yahwohl! and squeals of adulated love.

The seventy-two thousand one hundred and fifteen persons waiting outside the theatre were patient, hopeful, good-hearted, enthusiastic, loyal, determined and moronic. Now and again they surged here, paused and resurged there, lurches this way or swayed the other, flattening their neighbours flatter to allow a car to pass, fired by the hope that it might contain the gross and revolting forms of Earle and Mugsy. Then their great moment would be upon them; they would regurgitate their British phlegm and shout, groan, yawp, chortle and take each other's wallets with wild abandon. . . .

At last the news spread from lip to lip, from nose to nose, from hand to mouth, from hand to nose throughout the vast expectant mob: "They're coming! Lift up your voices, raise your hats, disgorge your teeth, destroy the air, hoo this hoo that the glory of our race, those jolly lads of idiot face are driving hand over fist towards this spot!" A great gurgle rose from the crowd like bath water taking leave of bath.

Into Argyle Street blundered the most fabulous machine the American laugh-industry has ever defestrated. The object, article or monster it is our pleasure, nay, our duty, to describe had once upon a time been born an Austin Seven of that tourer type extinct. The hood was down and the craving, craning, thrusting, muttering, mopsical mob observed with gleeful relish that the back of the ex-automobile was occupied by an enormous birdcage containing a moth-eaten parrot. Huge and shiny brass lamps adorned the front of the

rattlenest and the driver honked histrionically upon a huge convolvular klaxon. From the starting-handle hung a For Sale notice ("£3 or highest offer") and attached to the windscreen was an umbrella which flaunted its ribs before the populace.

The occupants were indubitably THEM. The driver had Mugsy's close-cropped tow-head and inimical glare, his companion Earle's apprehensive eyes and long, idealistic face. No longer able to contain its emotion ~~the~~ crowd rushed forward euphoniously yawping: "Mugsy! Earle! Earle! Mugsy!" and suchlike rodomontades. St. John Ambulance men started up the motor which brought into action their specially prepared casualty conveyor-belt, and fainthees, fractures and the dead were trundled off to the Middlesex Hospital in neat little waxed-cardboard containers.

The car was hoisted upon willing shoulders and carried triumphantly to the Pandemonium entrance. A wheel dropped off and the parrot died of fright uttering a last desperate squeak of: "Give Bedser a bowl!" Instead of beaming like a sliced melon and chirruping "Well, I'll be doggone," Mugsy shouted: "Hey! Who pinched that wheel? Thief! Vandal! Iconoclast!" Earle climbed on to the bonnet and bent sorrowfully over, bent over sorrowfully or if you prefer it sorrowfully bent over, and scoring out the symbol "£3" with a blue pencil wrote above it on the For Sale notice the dismal legend "£2 17s. 6d."

But of course, as everyone knows, even Bert Laggs, you • never can tell with them boys. Fat men laughed so much at the brilliant clowning of their never-idle idols that they got hiccups and turned into pats of lard. Thin men laughed and grew fat. A fellow named M. Finnegan, from Donegal, he grew fat and then grew thin again, much to the distress of his wife Fiona Finnegan, *née* Murphy, who saw the whole thing on television from her landlady's sitting-room in Market Harborough. Mugsy, all agreed, fat with thin, thin with thin, fat with fat and thin with fat, was putting on a terrific show: "Put it down!" he was shouting, dancing on the seat like Sugar Ray Robinson: "Police! Fire! Ambulance! Boy

Scouts! Church Lads' Brigade! Salvation Army! Negley Farson! Hullabaloo! Reductio ad absurdum! Non angli sed angelorum! Words to that effect! Ditto! Help! And so forth!" An impressive sight, a depressing sound, but intoxicating to the murmurous mob.

Earle put his head in his hands and his shoulders heaved tragically. It was well known to everyone, even Bert Laggs, that Earle, the more serious artist of the two mirth-masters, had told Mr. Metro, Mr. Goldwyn and Mr. Mayer that he didn't want to spend his whole life splitting sides, but felt himself the ideal person to take the parts of Hamlet, King Lear, Napoleon, Mary Rose, Stalin, Rebecca West, Saint Joan, Svengali, Herbert Sutcliffe, Mr. Pickwick and Arthur Wigstole. The flock recognised then that here was tragic acting of a high order and howled with suitable and audible joy.

The cortège was now winding wobbly up the steps to the theatre entrance. The manager, a man named Rosencrantz Gildenstern, appeared with considerable aplomb, a welcoming smile distorting his features. He stood plumply poised on the top step at the edge of the crimson carpet. The smile, once forced into place on his face-substitute or pudding, wouldn't go away. When eventually he rid himself of the thing by kicking himself sharply on the ankle and squealing with pain he resembled Queen Victoria refusing to laugh at Carlyle's joke about Tennyson's straggly whiskers.

"Who are these creatures?" he demanded of the ravening crowd, like Cyril Connolly confronting two poets who had never heard of Valéry.

"Mugsy!" squawdled the flappers. "Earle!" fluted the fans. Or, contrarily "Earle!" squawdled the fluters. "Mugsy!" flapped the fans.

"Put the impostors down!" said Gildenstern.

Even the most pronounced and preposterous pap feeders present realised that something was wrong. Some reeled, some wailed, some almost paled,* some simpered, some staggered, some had the vapours. The car was lowered, none too

* See Dostoevsky, *passim*.

gently—a sparking plug fell out, the right rear wing flew away and the tail light tinkled to the pavement. Everyone stood around like extras when the star's in a tantrum.

"What am I to understand by *this*?" said R. Gildenstern.

"They're Earle and Mugsy," coaxed a bobbysoxer.

"Earle and Mugsy!" cried R. Gildenstern with a vicious twitch of his lower denture. "Gate-crashers! Interlopers! And they'll be outerlopers sooner than one could be expected to say Hyman Levy if I have anything to do with it."

He seized pseudo-Earle by the ear and snarled: "Who are you? What's your name? Where were you born? When? Why? Who was your mum? Who was your dad? Who was that lady I saw you with last night? Have you ever had an infectious disease? Or been a member of the Communist Party? Eh? Speak up!"

Realisation of the horrible truth seeped through the stunderfounded crowd. A Covent Garden porter named Cole seized pseudo-Mugsy by *his* ear and growled: "Yerss, where's your identificatory card?"

It was very painful on the ears, and the wretched pseudos danced up and down yelling "Ouch! Yowl! Leggo!" and other traditional cries.*

"I'll leggo yer!" said the porter, Cole, and jerked Mugsy's ear till he fluttered like a pennant on a windy day at Cowes.

Everyone, even Bert Laggs, was now abreast of the situation.

"Ought to be locked up in Wigan Barracks, them two, that's what. . . . False pretences, both the pair of them, need squeegeeing, so they ought. . . . Hardly the thing, do you think, gate-crashing and so forth, chaps, good heavens, what with one thing and another, I daren't imagine what F. R. Brown would say. . . . Exhibitionists! Swindlers! Un-American grubs! Desperadoes! Spies! Spivs! Lacedæmonians! Dredgings! Hake! Quislings! Froglegs! Where's the cops? Masticate 'em! Dismember 'em! Turn them inside out! Give 'em beans and spaghetti! Police! Ahoy! Ahoo! Aroodlededoo!"

* See Frank Richards.

It was a blessing, as we hope you will agree, that Inspector French arrived at this moment. He had just cleared up the Cheyne mystery and was feeling very pleased with himself. He absorbed the situation with a single look and decided that something was amiss. This promptness and accuracy of observation was, in his view, a matter of training.

"Now then," he said, pleasantly. "Anything I can do?"

"Yes, clean the egg off your moustache," muttered one of the angry pseudos, only to be pinched into silence by the dutiful Cole.

"Clear case of masquerade," explained a young clerk named Clark, touching his A. Eden hat.

"I'm relieved to hear that," rejoined the equable French.

"And see that whatever they say is taken down a peg or two and used in evidence against them," screamed a shrewish old teashop-proprietress, up to her trix.

"Let us deal calmly with the affair, like Britishers," said French calmly, and turned as upon a spit (though in fact, to state the obvious, Cole Porter did all the spitting) towards the unfortunate young pseudos, whose ears now resembled monstrous vegetable growths. "What's the trouble?"

"Our ears have been assaulted," said pseudo-Mugsy, "our reputations sullied, and our car dismantled by a gaggle of revolting sewer-swillers and you ask us what the trouble is. Let me tell you, sir, any change would be as good as a holiday."

"No doubt, no doubt," agreed French.

"I've always abided—or abode—by the law," said pseudo-Earle, "and *this* is what comes of it." He indicated his distorted ear.

"Probably Trotskyists," remarked a student.

"Who, in point of fact, *are* you?" asked the equable French calmly.

"Charlatan"—"Picklewit," they replied simultaneously.

"I suppose you both realise that it's an offence to cause an obstruction on a public highway?" said French with humour as dry as a water-biscuit.

"I'll give evidence, Inspector, I've had my eye on them," sniffed a dog-fancier.

"The best thing I can suggest to you gentlemen is : vanish," the Inspector said. "Public opinion being what it is——"

To suggest that these scoundrelly, degraded criminals should escape scot-free was more than the crowd could endure. They began to mutter and mumble and grumble in the gutter.

"I think someone owes us an apology," began Charlatan with considerable dignity but Picklewit, the realist, trod on his toe.

"Shut up," he hissed. "We'll be lucky to get away with our trousers."

"I'll give you apology," shouted the porter, and punched Charlatan in the stomach.

"Mugsy!" shrieked the teashop proprietress and smacked him on the head with her handbag.

"I also," trilled the retired greengrocer, an educated man, and squashed a retired tomato on Charlatan's nose.

Picklewit tugged his belaboured partner by the arm and they skedaddled one-two one-two one-two etcetera. All the way to freedom they were kicked and punched and clouted and pummelled until a Rolls Royce soothed into sight and a schoolgirl ecstatically chirruped : "Mugsy! Earle!"

Everyone forgot Charlatan and Picklewit. The Rolls Royce drew up, the door opened, there was an explosion of cheering and the sharp-eyed saw a pair of flannel-covered bottoms disappearing up the steps of the theatre. There was a mass sigh of complete fulfilment.

Safely away from the throng Charlatan sank panting against the wall.

"You look a rich mess," said Picklewit.

"What about you! That bloated eye!" retorted Charlatan.

"Your ear! Those porps!"

"Your ripped shirt!"

"Your minced coat!"

"And your split lip!"

They helped each other to mop up tomato, dab cuts and adjust desecrated clothing.

"I suppose you realise we're ruined," Charlatan said. "We'll never get the car back now and if we did it's shattered beyond repair, and that represented our only capital asset."

Picklewit turned his pockets inside out. "To hell with capital," he said. "It only drags you down. And there's always Sir Arnold. I don't trust him of course, I don't trust anybody. I wasn't going to take any notice of that letter. No one would write and offer *us* a job, unless he was a loony or a crook.* But if he's a crook we can swindle him and if he's not we can swindle him even better. From the look of his signature he is a crook. That exaggerated loop! That hook! Those f's! Horrible. And I've never heard of the Institute of Art and Culture. Still, anything's better than honest work for the good of Society."

"Even Sir Arnold, who is I'm sure a most estimable man, can't bring Edith back," said Charlatan. "O poor poll-parrot, how harshly life has treated you, how suddenly Death like a gangling snerge, came down to snatch thee up!"

Picklewit hid his face in his hands and then sneered at Charlatan through his fingers. "Dead parrots tell no tales," he said. "Besides, Bedser's past his best. But ~~if~~ it'll comfort you we'll start a crusade to make the world safe for parrots to moult in, and sell the idea to Sir Arnold for five pounds ten and six."

Charlatan's ears lit up. "Oh yes," he said. "Oh yes yes. Oh yes yes yes. Oh yes yes yes yes. A world fit for poor innocent parrots who never did no harm to nobody to whistle and swear in. You're a noble soul after all, Picklewit, and I was beginning to doubt it. Shame upon me. . . . Do you remember how Edith used to peck at our candyfloss? And how she used to murmur 'Charlie' when she saw me totter home from the nut-and-bolt factory?"

"She murmured a damn sight worse things when I came back from the Labour Exchange," said Picklewit.

Charlatan straightened up. "Picklewit," he said, "this is not manly. To business. Where are we going? What is Sir Arnold's address? When? Whither?"

* Turn to p. 75 for confirmation of this astonishing prophecy.

"Number 22 Neptune Street sounds as fictional to me as an autobiography," Picklewit grumbled, "but you never know with culture."

They scissored briskly along trying in vain to look efficient and personable. All the same, you know, they weren't such bad chaps. Couldn't help but like them, *actually*.

Neptune Street was sad and sooty, but as Picklewit pointed out: "Successful swindlers don't live in coal-holes and if he's unsuccessful, he's a fool and we'll diddle him."

They rang, ting-a-ling, at Number 22, which looked as flat and slabbish as Numbers 21, 23, 24, 25 et omnium ad astra. The door was opened by a short woman wearing an off-white apron. Wisps of grey hair protruded from her head like fungoid growths.

"Is Sir Arnold in?" Picklewit asked gravely. Gravely didn't reply, but the woman bent at the knees and shrieked with laughter. Disturbing, eh?

"E'd rupture himself if he eard you call im that, Arnold would," she said. "Come on in. E ain't ome yet but e won't be long, worse luck."

They entered a cavern decorated with macintoshes and old Army greatcoats, four of each, and turned into a room smelling of fried nappies and chips.

"Ave a cupper tea," said Lady Arnold.

"Well *actually* you know, we had some on the way," Charlatan weakly protested.*

"Another cupper tea won't never urt no one, Arnold always says."

The room was filled with kids. Some were hung about with odd bits of clothing—pinafores, shirts, shorts, a shoe or so, others were bare and wet. Lady Arnold was trying to catch and bathe them, but they kept slipping under couches and sideboards and whatnots. One she seized by the leg as it was climbing up the chimney and pulled it smartly to earth.

"Got you, you little bugger," she said cheerfully. "E's a terror for soot. E *do* like soot. I often says to Arnold, give

* He would have protested monthly had he stayed there long enough.

that child a bag of soot and e's as appy as a loony. Ere, take the little perisher arf a mo, there's a good chap."

She dumped him upside down on Charlatan's lap, such as it was. He stuck a sooty toe in Charlatan's tea and churned it up. (It needed churning because of the seven teaspoonfuls of sugar.)

One by one the horde was splashed and despatched to bed, and after each ceremony Lady Arnold poured out cups of tea.

"Tea's a blessin," she said.

The whole performance took about forty minutes. What with spilt cups of tea, water squirted from the sponge, tears, soap suds, and various undignified digs, to coin a paradox, in various parts of the anatomy from an apparently unending procession of children, Charlatan and Picklewit felt limp, lifeless and lopsided in that order by the time all was over. Flinging the last baby aside, Lady Arnold stretched out a hand and caught Picklewit by the ear (the painful one) and was about to smack the sponge down on his redundant head when he let out a sensational roar and broke a window-pane in a nearby billiards saloon, which caused consternation in *carpe diem*.

"Bless my soul," she said, bending and stretching her so-called legs, "I thought you was one of them horrible kids. Do you mean to say they're all done for? When I gets into the swing I just can't seem to stop. It's an abit." She fell backwards into a chair, sprong, thus: sprong, then bounced up again, pop, and "Let's ave a cupper tea," she said.

"No, really, I say, look here, I've had enough, honestly I mean, well, good heavens, it's too much after all, Great Horps," Charlatan explained.

"Can't never ave enough tea," Lady Arnold said, pouring him a cup with gusto, which is excellent.

They sat in silence for twenty seconds, then Lady Arnold heaved herself up, bombarded to the sideboard and came back with a large flat brown book. "Snaps," she said.

They all drew together and she opened the book. "Me eldest," she said. "E's another Arnold."

"Pity," said Picklewit, and Charlatan kicked him. "Pity there aren't more like him," said Picklewit.

After that they saw Lady Arnold on the beach at Southend, Sir Arnold watching Preston North End, Lady Arnold with gran, Sir Arnold riding a bike on the sands, Millie's wedding group, Lady Arnold's dad receiving an illuminated address (not, it appeared, Number 22 Neptune Street), Porky (a wire-haired terrier), Mavis in the part of Fairy Chrystal at the school panto, Mrs. Dobbs, the south-west corner of Sir Arnold's allotment, Joe (the year before he died), the hospital where Sir Arnold had his appendix out, Uncle Perce as Father Christmas, a friend of Mary's called Peggy, Lady Arnold in a bathing costume, Mrs. Dobbs, Sir Arnold in uniform, Alan and his girl-friend Susan dressed like a high-wayman and highwaywoman respectively at a fancy-dress ball, George with his head through a cardboard sailor, gran's tombstone at Wembley, Sir Arnold holding the cup he won at snooker, Mrs. Dobbs. . . . Then they heard Sir Arnold coming in, thus: thump thump crash thump. He nodded at Charlatan and Picklewit, ate two kippers and four slices of bread and butter, and drank five cups of tea. He and Lady Arnold talked all the while about someone called Old Simpkins, whom they agreed was no bloody use to nobody.

Sir Arnold pushed away his cup, got up, nodded again, thus: nod, and went out.

"E do like is pint," Lady Arnold said. "Just one, that's all e as, every night, regular as clockwork."

• "But when's he going to talk to us?" grumbled Picklewit.

Lady Arnold looked doubtful.* "Dunno," she said. "When e comes ome, praps, though e's not much of a one for talking after is pint. Usually goes straight to bed. Do you want to talk to im urgent?"

"He asked us to come," Charlatan explained.

"Did he? Well, e must've forgotten. Just like Arnold, that is. I'll mention it to im when e comes ome."

"The envelope was marked 'urgent,'" persisted Charlatan.

* We mention this because it would be possible to say 'dunno' without looking doubtful, and this might be significant. Very.

"Envelope? What envelope?"

"The one he put his letter in," said Charlatan.

"What, Arnold wrote a letter? That's not like Arnold. I've never known im write a letter, not since we was married, except at Christmas, thanking gran for er bedsocks. She always sends bedsocks. No, wait—once she sent cushion covers, but that was a mistake. She said so afterwards."

"Well he wrote us a letter, I assure you, I mean," Charlatan said doggedly.

"Wonders will never cease," said Lady Arnold.

After that she showed them the cushion covers and insisted on giving Charlatan a pair of bedsocks. She said he reminded her of her brother Alf.

Just after ten the front door slammed and they heard someone thumping upstairs.

"That's im," said Lady Arnold. "E'll be asleep inside five minutes. You'd best see im in the morning."

"The trouble is," said Picklewit, "we live out at Hendon." (The real trouble was that they hadn't been living anywhere since that morning, and hadn't the money to pay for lodgings.)

"Best thing to do," said Lady Arnold, "is stay the night. I'll fix you up on the sofa. You might get five minutes with im in the morning."

"Oh I say we couldn't possibly dream of troubling you," said Charlatan.

"Course you could. Won't take a couple of jiffs."* She looked searchingly at Charlatan. "Oo you *are* like Alf," she said. "Spittin image of im."

Picklewit and Charlatan spent a troubled night. What had gone wrong? Why was Sir Arnold playing with them like cat with mice? Were they being watched by spies? Was he forced to wait his moment to reveal his plans? Were they being drawn willy-nilly into some devilish conspiracy? Were

* We feel it incumbent upon us, in the interests of Truth, to record the exact words of all participants in this tale, however dull they may appear. We are sure that Her Majesty's Stationary Office (the one that doesn't move, you know) would support us in this.



Lady Arnold and her family part of some heinous scheme to cheat them of their birthright? Was anything what it seemed? Who knows what strange mission they had embarked upon? Whither would this adventure lead them?

Lady Arnold laid the breakfast while Picklewit and Charlatan dressed behind blankets hung on the airing line. Sir Arnold was in a morose mood. He glanced at Charlatan and Picklewit, grunted, thus: grunt, and picked up the newspaper. Half way through his egg he snarled, threw down knife and fork and said: "Bloody thing's bad."

"Ave some tea," said his wife meekly.

"All you're fit for, making tea," he growled back. "Couldn't cook a ruddy ledger, you couldn't."

Picklewit booted Charlatan under the table. "Get on with it," he hissed like an agitated goose.

"Er—excuse me," said Charlatan.

Sir Arnold looked up suddenly, crumpling his newspaper, and glared. "Why the ell should I?" he said. "Don't know you. Don't want to. What are you doing here anyway. Some game of my wife's, I suppose, aving young men about the ouse."

"I'm Charlatan," said Charlatan.

"Don't care if you're ruddy Churchill. I likes me breakfast in peace."

"But you wrote us a letter!" cried Charlatan.

Sir Arnold put down his crumpled newspaper deliberately and glared a good deal. "I wrote you a letter!" he said. "I wrote a bleedin letter? Me? Ere, Norah"—turning to his wife, you know, whose name, as it chanced, was Norah—"ave I ever wrote a ruddy letter, save at Christmas?"

"Same as I told em," she said, very primly. "I said to these young men, 'Arnold write a letter?' I said, 'e don't old with writin letters, e'd die first.'"

"Save at Christmas," said Sir Arnold, *sub rosa* and *sotto voce*. He looked keenly at the young men, who had gone as pail as hail. "What are you trying to put over on me I'd like to know," he said. "I'm not sure as this isn't a matter for the

police. Ere, Norah, nip round to the call box and dial nine-nine-nine."

Charlatan felt all will to resist flowing out of him like tea from a cracked cup. "No, no," he moaned, "not the police."

"This is a clear case of blackmail, this is," said Sir Arnold. "A clear case. Yerss. Blackmail. You come ere and foist yourselves off on my wife, innocent as she is and quite uncomprehensible in the ways of the world, you eat our food, sleep in our beds, in a manner of speaking, take advantage of our hospitality—and then ave the downright whatdyoumecallit to make accusations!"

Picklewit roused himself with an effort and produced a scrap of paper. "Here," he said feebly.

Sir Arnold looked at it as though it were a naked electric wire. "What's that?"

"The letter."

Sir Arnold took the object gingerly between thumb and forefinger.*

"And you accuse me of writing *this*?"

"Didn't you?" stuttered Charlatan with the stutmost respect.

"Didn't I? . I most bloody well certainly did not! The thing's *typed*!"

"But the name! The address!" bleated our heroes despairingly.

"The name," answered Sir Arnold with remote dignity, "is Sir Arnold Springthorpe, a gentleman of whom I do not pretend to ave been acquainted with. The address is 22 Neptune Street, London, W.C.1."

"But this *is*——" began Picklewit.

"22 Neptune Street, London, W.18."

"Good heavens," said Picklewit, as one resigned to the inevitable.

Arnold (he probably felt keenly the loss of his title) rose: "Get out," he thundered in a voice of thunder. "Get out before I throw you out with me bare ands!"

They did so, one two three.

* Note the precision of our realism.

Looking back they noticed for the first time a neat little board on the front of the house: Arnold Biggs, Practical Chimney Sweep.

They wandered miserably as a pair of draggled rain clouds down the street, their hearts thumping sadly, their ears tingling and their noses egregiously cold. (It was a cold morning.)

"You're a fool," said Picklewit. "That was the wrong house."

"I feel horribly pale," said Charlatan. "I feel like going into a billiards saloon and causing a sensation."*

They mooned moodily through the forlorn streets of Ws 18, 17, 16, 15, 14 etcetera until they found themselves, muddy but unbowed, in W.C.

"For goodness' sake be careful this time," said Charlatan as Picklewit took out the grubby piece of paper to make absolutely sure.

"This appears to be it," said Picklewit. They stood outside a massive building with a huge Corinthian portico. A large brass plate said: Snuffaglove Ltd. and Inc., Cromek Holdings, Etc.

Charlatan relaxed. "I feel happier now," he said. "Oh, the horror of last night."

"The ghastly terror of breakfast!" said Picklewit, then pulled himself together. "Nonsense," he said. "Come along."

"Let's ask this kind-looking gentleman where to go," said Charlatan.

The gentleman wore a long coat like Marshal Ney and a braided peaked cap like Marshal Foch. His coat was apple-green with banana-yellow facings.

"Excuse me," said Charlatan politely.

"Just inside on the left," said the gentleman, smiling, deferentially touching his smart peaked cap and adding "Sir."

They went up the steps, one two three four and so on, with confidence dribbling once more into their leaky hulks, and came to an immensely high and impressively gloomy hall. Round the walls hung portraits of Schnozzle Durante, Cyrano

* See, once more, Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, *passim*.

de Bergerac, Disraeli, Les Gants the boxer and various Victorian father-figures distinguished from other Victorian father-figures only by their enormous mitts. A Latin inscription over a prie-dieu read: *Manus sed nostra*. On the left of something or other was a doorway with the flaps flung wide.

Charlatan and Picklewit passed through. A long, shiny mahogany table stretched down the centre of the room. Round it sat about twenty extinguished-looking gentlemen, some of them white-haired and some of them bald, some with moustaches, some with little beards, all looking grave and historic.

Picklewit whispered to Charlatan: "This is more the kind of tomfoolery I expected. On with the job. These are the geezers."

Charlatan whispered back: "You can feel the aura of gentility."

"And of good-breeding," sneered Picklewit, "they're all wearing kid gloves, except for that chap with the mailed fist."

"Backbone of the country," whispered Charlatan.

"Golden acres, coal, whisky etcetera."

"Hydro-electric power-stations."

"Investments in Malayan tin, I shouldn't wonder."

"And Rhodesian copper."

"With a peerage at the end of it."

"And a life-membership of the M.C.C."

"Or a controlling share in the A.B.C. Free buns," sighed Picklewit.

Meanwhile a white-haired old gentleman had risen to his feet, supporting himself by clutching tightly to his chair, and smiled tenderly at Picklewit and Charlatan.

"Welcome," he sneezed. "Your places are ready."

All the other gentlemen sneezed too and made sounds of approbation,* even half-rising and half-bowing; Picklewit and Charlatan half-sat down.

"I think we may proceed," half-sneezed* the Chairman. "Will the Secretary sneeze the minutes of the last meeting?"

* All this stuff about sneezing is probably highly significant, if you ask us.

The Secretary was a tiny man, so short that his nose rested on the table-top whenever he sneezed. When he spoke his jaw rapped the table and made a noise like knitting-needles clicking. Picklewit put his hand over his mouth to stifle a laugh. Charlatan, who is a rather more responsible and respectable person, as you will have noticed, looked away disgusted. (He was disgusted with Picklewit, not with the Secretary, who could not be held responsible for his shortness. Charlatan knew what is done and what is not done.)

Picklewit wrote on a piece of paper. "In Any Other Business I will propose a higher chair for the Secretary. Second?"

Charlatan screwed it up impatiently, put it in his pocket (or so he thought) and raised his hand to accept the minutes. (In fact, he had put it in the pocket of his neighbour, a very fat old gentleman already fast asleep, who woke periodically with a start, kicking the fellow opposite him on the ankle, knocking over the ink, and blowing his nose with a loud report. He seemed to have two or three handkerchiefs in every pocket. Then he would roar "Heah, heah" and fall asleep again, thus : bloff.)

Although Charlatan agreed with all that was said he couldn't understand any of it. He signed a book which was passed round and although he felt mystified by the general gasbagging, decided to believe Big Business to be a fine Way of Life; he continually nodded, sagely, thus : nod, not knowing quite what to sneeze. He was ashamed of Picklewit, who kept sniggering and making *sotto Larwood* remarks. Picklewit, he saw, would never be able to rise from his slough of tea-and-buns, crowded buses and anarchistic queue jumping at the Test match. Somehow, Charlatan thought, he himself had always belonged at heart to the world of champagne lunches, one-hundred-and-fifty-pound cameras and sea-going yachts.* Poor old Picklewit would never appreciate the beauty of such things. When they offered him, Charlatan,

* Yet always, notwithstanding, it should be noted, with a heartfelt sympathy for the lot of the poor and a desire to be friendly with everyone, even Bert Laggis, *mutatis mutandis*.

a directorship, he would certainly accept, but he would do so with a fine show of nonchalance, as one to whom honours have become a bit of a bore. Picklewit, on the other hand, would probably be flustered and make some shocking *faux pas*, such as calling the Chairman "Your Honour" or eating one of his horrible buns in the middle of the proceedings.

The Secretary was delivering a most impressive speech about holdings, stocks, debentures, dividends, preference shares, reversions, rates of interest and the gratifying sale of scooter-riders' gauntlets and tortoiseshell snuff-boxes. Here a member recorded his alarm at the tendency of TV programmes to encourage people to sneeze through other people's noses. The secretary replied, with a complacent snigger, that this menace was being attended to by Sir Arnold personally, as he had bought 90 per cent. of the shares in all commercial TV companies and intended to put the Government out of business. "You see," Charlatan hissed to Picklewit, "we're in the right place this time."

With zinc up one and a quarter, the secretary went on, how could rubber stretch any further? It was ~~all~~ very well for Imperial Tobacco to dodder round the 21s. 9d. mark but how could Wonder Snuff Lozenges be expected to hold out at 61s. 6d.? There were grave nods all round, and most of those present got busy with their pencils. Charlatan realised with horror that Picklewit, too, was busy with his pencil. Someone across the table was offering 8 to 1 on Howdy Stranger for the 4.30 and the Secretary was claiming that so long as United Molasses were up one and a half no one could expect Burps Jollity to hold a starting-price of 11 to 2. The Romance of Business was, in a manner of speaking, coursing through Charlatan's veins, especially as, whenever String Bags Ltd. was mentioned everyone leered at him in a frankly solicitous way and the Chairman (obviously Sir Arnold) mumbled something about the excellent prospects he entertained of coming to a mutually satisfactory arrangement.*

* A man who thinks by the inch and talks by the yard should be removed by the foot. (Joe Evans.)

since string bags could easily be sold as fingerless gloves, i.e., mittens.

The old gentleman next to Charlatan suddenly exploded even more loudly than usual and whipped half a dozen handkerchiefs from his left-hand jacket pocket.* A slip of paper fluttered into the air and floated gently on to the table before him. He picked it up and frowned at it, took out a pair of glasses, fitted them on his nose with preposterous precision, brought the paper up to his eyes, withdrew it, bent his eyes down to the paper (accompanied, of course, as they were, by the necessary head), rubbed his ears, went pale and said "Good gracious, Any Other Business already? I propose a higher chair for the Secretary. Will anyone second that?"

The Chairman sneezed, polished his glasses, put a finger down between his collar and his neck in the approved manner, denoting discomfort or so we have been told, and said "Not quite yet, m'Lord; we are still discussing the Annual Report. Perhaps you'll bring it up later." But m'Lord was already asleep again.

Charlatan trembled to observe that Picklewit had placed another slip of paper before him. It read, "Let's get out of here."

The idea of voluntarily sacrificing the opportunity of a lifetime so appalled Charlatan that he closed his eyes, went almost pale,† shifted uneasily on his seat and was about to create a sensation, when he decided first of all to remonstrate with Picklewit by snorts, grunts and head shakes. He opened his eyes, turned to his friend, the first snort all ready for launching, and—well, dash it, Picklewit had disappeared! A sense of impending doom began to envelop Charlatan. Clammy fingers of horror stole along his spine like beetle's legs. As unobtrusively as possible he craned this way and then craned that, thus: crane, and saw Picklewit making for the door on all fours! Charlatan's heart sank within him.

* Such details make for verisimilitude, as we have pointed out before.

† See Dusty, *passim*.

This, he felt, shows Picklewit in his true colours. But let him grovel on his belly. *I shall not surrender, I shall not throw away life's gifts like soiled socks. . . .*

The room was very quiet. Looking round in a hunted way he saw that everyone was staring at him, not hostilely but with concern and incredulity. The Secretary who was standing, peered at the book which lay on the table at the level of his chin. He was pointing to a name which had been signed there and whispering excitedly to his neighbour. Then he said to Charlatan in tones that ate into Charlatan's sensitive soul like acid: "Who *are* you?"

"I'm Charlatan," sneezed Charlatan, dutifully.

"And whom do you represent?"

This puzzled Charlatan so much that at first he could not find a word to sneeze except "Sgroffle," then, on a flood of relief he blurted out: "I used to be on the Puddletown Gazette and West Harptree Argus."

Everyone stared icily at everyone else, except the tired gentleman who stirred and said drowsily "I second that."

"I think this is a matter for the police," said the Secretary.

"No no, not again!" cried Charlatan.

"Ah, a habitual criminal," said the Chairman. "After company secrets, eh? Sent by old Hands Andersen of Nose Muffs Ltd., I suppose? But perhaps we'll turn the tables on Andersen yet. Perhaps we'll be able to make *you* talk, my lad. See how old Andersen will like that. Philmore, send for Cosbee."

The Secretary put his fingers between his lips and emitted a piercing whistle. Charlatan leapt to his feet. Some mistake had been made, obviously; he was innocent, certainly, but he couldn't risk being left to the mercy of Cosbee. No one would believe his explanations. He might be put on the rack or given to an Iron Maiden. They would force him to confess the most monstrous crimes. Escape! Escape!

He bulderdashed across the room, wrenched open the door and fled from the building into the bright sunshine. He did not even stop to salute the doorman but tore down the

road to the A.B.C., where he knew he would find Picklewit eating buns. He did.

"Traitor!" he said in a voice which thundered and echoed through the restaurant.

Without ceasing to munch Picklewit stolidly replied: "Imbecile."

"Cad!" retorted Charlatan.

"Lackey!" regurgitated Picklewit.

"Turncoat!" howled Charlatan.

"Stob!" cooed Picklewit.

When they were turned out Charlatan said, more calmly: "Which do you think was Sir Arnold?"

"None of them," Picklewit grunted. "They were just throwing snuff up our nostrils."

"Sir Arnold wasn't *there*? Oh, Great Horps! But we're under an obligation to find him," Charlatan ejaculated. "Let's look at that address again."

They stood opposite the Snuffaglove Offices once more. "Strange," said Charlatan, with the air of one who sees something odd. "It is Number 22, this *is* Neptune Street, and the district *is* W.C.I. How have our plans foundered?"

"Simple," said Picklewit. "Sir Arnold must be on another floor. We'd better try again. And don't go into the first room you see this time, Fracturebrain."

"No!" said Charlatan. "We simply cannot enter that terrible building again. They threatened to send for someone named Cosbee!"

"A splendid fellow, no doubt," Picklewit said. "Nothing could be easier than to circumvent their plots." He led the way into a Magical and Theatrical Properties Shop. When they came out they wore long bristly moustaches, for which Picklewit had exchanged his penknife and Charlatan his propelling-pencil.

The military gentleman bowed as they went in. After five minutes search they found a board which informed them that Sir Arnold Springthorpe's Cultural Office was on the seventh floor. A thin icy object in Enquiries asked them who

they were, and when they told her she commanded them coldly to "go through."

"This is it," Charlatan whispered to Picklewit.

"Don't be too sure," Picklewit whispered back. "It may be M.I.5 headquarters for all we know."

CHAPTER TWO

*In which two English gentlemen
become cultural crusaders*

EVEN AS THEIR knuckles were delicately poised to indent upon Sir Arnoid Springthorpe's magniloquent door a humble application, the door itself was wrenched wide, thus: wrench, and a long, knobbly contrivance stumbled forth. Turning upon them the full glare of its baleful orbs it rumbled hollowly: "Revoltin' ninnies! Nits of culture! Nail-parings!" and bombinated into the distance.

"An ungracious fellow, one would have said," Charlatan remarked.

"Picklewit, my dear chap," enunciated a voice with precisely the proper cultural enunciation and a plump hand plobbered against Charlatan's. A pair of colourless, odourless, expressionless eyes set in a round, amorphous and impervious face non-gazed neutrally past his ear.

"Charlatan, delighted to meet you," the proper enunciation continued appropriately and the same fish-hand wafted Picklewit's paw twice into the air. "Take no notice of Bite—you've heard of Crampon Bite, of course, the well-known potato critic? A soured fellow who believes culture is finished ha ha and Britain going to perdition hee hee, that's why he concentrates on potatoes, says they have body in them, not to mention eyes, ho ho. However, you and I know differently, do we not, eh eh? Britain is on the cultural upgrade eh is it not, eh ah?" His stare slid glassily between them, like a fish slice.*

* A glass fish-slice, naturally.

"Oh quite, quite, quite, quite, quite, quite," Charlatan hastened to agree, for Picklewit looked as if he might shout aloud his approval of the odious Bite.

"Good, splendid, naturally," Sir Arnold chortled coldly, bouncing with distant jollity towards his shiny desk. "I'm so pleased to see you, my dear fellows, you are just the men for the job, that's my firm opinion, based as it is on the relevant data, just the very men as I said to my friend Lord Blethers of the League of Hope and Health only the other day, 'If we are to scotch the cultural pessimists, Blethers,' I said, 'we must get the youngsters on the job, Blethers, not old codgers like ourselves, the lively lads with bright ideas,' and my thoughts turned to your Vacuist movement of a year or two ago, my friends. A lively group, a new-style notion, well tailored and nicely presented. Sold excellently in South America, I understand. Personally I thought it should have gone over strongly in the States, given proper backing and publicity. What became of Jonathan Dean the webbing sculptor? And the poet fellow, Sturgeon MacReady, who wrote on fish-scales with a pin? And the porridge moulder, Stodge? Why do we hear no more of Vacuism?"

"No cash," said Picklewit succinctly. His expression was unruly and stale. Charlatan was beginning to feel ashamed of him once more.

"Well well well there's no need to worry about funds for a month or two, my dear chaps, if you accept the direction of my little mission. I want your answer immediately, mind, it's an important matter, can't wait, and I'm off to Paris, Persia, Siam and Singapore tomorrow or the day after depending on bookings, pamphletings and so forth." He became suddenly business-like, his eyes bulging with impatient disdain. "Come, what do you say, gentlemen, eh eh?"

"Oh quite quite quite quite quite quite quite," Charlatan hurriedly said, but Picklewit was not to be rushed.

"What mission?" he muttered surlily.

"Eh? Surely I explained?" Sir Arnold said, a pale irritation twitching his pudding-substitute, or face. "Certainly I *thought* I had explained clearly enough to illuminate the container

of a vegetable marrow. However, ah well, let's see, in short the Rehabilitation of British Culture, that's your aim, gentlemen, an investigation, with a view to providing incontrovertible and incontestable evidence of the vitality of British Culture, to establishing the fact that alone within the world cultural nexus our country is impervious to entropy."

"What's——" began Picklewit, but Charlatan guessed the horrible truth at once: the idiot didn't know the meaning of entropy. "A munificent idea, Sir Arnold," he bleated. "We shall be only too happy and—er—so forth to undertake such a noble task. Ah—shall we have assistance of any kind?" (He sought hopelessly in the recesses of his container to discover a clue to the meaning of the word entropy, but failed.)

"Certainly. By all means. Of course. Within reason. I have your papers here—briefing, authorisation, list of members, draft on stores and so on and so on and so forth. Officially sponsored, no need to worry, report twice weekly by telephone, once weekly by letter, full details, plans, projects, accomplishments, photographs, statistics, graphs, everything. Efficiency, despatch, accuracy, zeal, for there will be questions asked in the House, you may be sure of that." He gave them a froglike and disgusted look, just as though they were horrible mouldiworts.

"Who are our stooges?" said Picklewit crudely.

Charlatan blanched, twitched and blew his nose in spasmodic embarrassment. "Well I mean to say after all," his expression declared more plainly than words.

"I will ask your assistants to come in, they're all here, hanging about in the lock-up. You will then be able to judge their quality for yourselves. I engaged them only this morning. A splendid collection of garbage, though I say so myself. But before you meet the galaxy of experts I have chosen for you I want to make one point abundantly clear." Sir Arnold rose and gargled with whisky, spitting out the used spirit into a flower vase. (Vandalism, as I think you will agree. Not the act of a man of culture. However, who are we to judge?) "This mission will not be easy. No. I think I may say that

with conviction. Yes. You must not fail, however. No. I think I may say that with some degree of dogmatism. Yes. We have our enemies, who will soon be *your* enemies. Remember that. Not only is Britain stuffed to the gills with enemies of Britain but worse, even among overt patriots there are men stupid enough to misunderstand, misinterpret and misogynise. Now, I know your records, gentlemen. You will not fail me, of that I am sure. I do not wish you to fail. Nor, I am sure, will you wish to fail when you realise that the police will *not* be interested in your careers provided that you succeed in your mission." He dwindled from the room.

"Blackmailing squirt," said Picklewit. "He's dug up that story about the Mail Order racket, I expect, or he's been talking to the printer fellows in Whitechapel. The skunk! That's why he engaged us, Charlatan my boy, not because of our brains and culture but because he knows he can get us juggled any time we don't do what we're told. That's *his* British avoirdupois, Charlie. All the others will be in the same boat, you'll see; you can guess what a fine lot of swabs they'll turn out."

"Shh, Picklewit, for goodness' sake," cried Charlatan. "He's doing us a great service, surely you realise that. Without his generous offer we should have been penniless, bunless and hopeless, Picklewit. I'm ashamed of you. Just look at his posh office, my dear chap, why it's got a swivel chair, for instance, and a syphon and a filing cabinet; he's an important cultural nob, an ornament of society, and it's a wonderful thing that he should even know our names. Sir Arnold is aware of what's what and who's who in every walk of life, Picklewit, he must have plentiful funds and this is our big chance. I hope you won't let me down by doing anything uncouth and becoming non persona grata. This will be a glorious, meritorious task. Shhhh!"

Through the yawning door flooded a collection of sinister possibilities: a tall, gangling fellow with a long nose,* waving

* The comma is to indicate that it was the fellow and not the nose which waved the shooting stick. These points of grammar and style may come in useful to some of you in later years.

a keenly sensitive shooting stick with studied nonchalance; a lumbering gallumphing lout wearing overalls and a truculent expression; a bouncing barrel of lard packed with dubious joie de vivre and pate de foie gras who was pressing his bulk as close as he could to the slim, trim, delectable elegance of a young woman upon whom Charlatan and Picklewit fixed their gaze, Charlatan's gaze being rapt and idealistic and his thoughts filled with knights errant, princesses and so forth, Picklewit's gaze rather that of a man deciding what an object will fetch on the black market.

"This, gentlemen, is Hilda Houri, who will I'm sure prove as tactful and efficient a secretary, stenographer and paper organiser as you would find in the whole of Nether Stowey," Sir Arnold said, beaming with hostility.

"He means we've got to organise a cultural paper-chase from here to Nether Stowey," explained Picklewit grumpily.

"Shhh," said Charlatan. "And hush too."

"This is Quintus Brute, one of the most brilliant statisticians it has ever been my misfortune to encounter, and certainly the brightest luminary of his age, in the world of sex-investigation," Sir Arnold continued glibly, and the fat man tried hard to bow.

"What is his age? Forty-five?" Picklewit muttered.

"Dennis Tripod, your photographer." The angular chap poked up a jaunty shooting-stick.

"Indecent exposures his speciality," sneered Picklewit.

"Joe Snagg is the mechanic and runs the pantechnicon which is one of the most remarkable features of your expedition, equipped as it is with television cameras, geiger counters, raltando units, electrified typewriters and doldonised extension finders. He can make or mend anything, can't you Joe?" Sir Arnold oozed false bonhomie.

"No," said Joe Snagg. "Owdo," he added gruffly to our heroes.*

"Here are your chiefs then, team; you will, I'm sure, be keen to set about your onerous but significant tasks at once. Goodbye." Sir Arnold plumped down at his desk, snatched

* The bigger the mouth, the better it looks when shut. (Joe Evans.)

a telephone and said "Get me the remains of the British Council." Fishy and unseeing, his eyes informed them all that he had already forgotten their existence.

"Just one thing, Sir Arnold," Picklewit said mildly, leaning elastically forward until his persistent gaze met the dead-bream look of the cultural mogul.

Sir Arnold's face garbled horribly and for a flossical moment resembled that of a Lugosi-Karloff apparition watching P. B. H. May being bowled for a duck.

"What? I'm as busy as a Bishop and have an urgent call booked to New Scotland Yard," Sir Arnold said with baleful significance.

"We don't budge from here," said Picklewit, "until my friend and I have authorisation to purchase two motor-bikes from the Mission's funds."

"Motor bikes?"

"Motor bikes."

"Motor bikes are not cultural."

"On the contrary, Britain is famous for her motor bikes and for nothing else whatsoever. Our footballers are beaten at football by Yugoslavs, Hungarians, Uruguayans, Ectoplasms and others, our cricketers lose to West Indians, Australians and Pakistanis, our racing cars don't start at all or if they start they don't finish or if they finish they finish tenth, our pontooners lose at pontoon, our writers attend the wrong conferences and write the wrong books, our tennis players are no good at tennis, our painters have never been heard of in Tibet, but our motor cycles have actually been known to win races, though many years ago, naturally. Representatives of British resurgence must travel on British motor bikes. Do our trains ever beat records? Not since 1913, 1935 or whenever it was. Are our buses famous? Certainly not. Motor bikes must bear their non-entropic cargo through the length and breadth of the land."

Sir Arnold looked glaucously thoughtful or, should you prefer it, thoughtfully glaucous. "You will not find me prepared to dip heavily into reserve funds to finance this mission," he said at last.

"Exactly," said Picklewit. "That's why I want those motor bikes before you nip off to Morocco. After all, Sir Arnold, we depend on you, but in some sort as it were you depend on us. How quickly could you gather another such crew of unsavoury parasites if we all resigned immediately?"

Q. Brute grunted and H. Houri squealed in protest but Picklewit had won the first round. Sir Arnold seized a piece of paper, thus: seize, and scribbled, thus: scribble, scribble, scribble. "Here you are," he said. "Motor cycle authorisation. But *second-hand* motor cycles, let it be understood, *second-hand* ones, you know." He waved abruptly towards the door. The cultural mission fiddled and faddled out into the street.

CHAPTER THREE

*In which[†] two English gentlemen
review a fine body of troops*

THE WORLD WAS before them. The only trouble was, they hadn't any idea where to go. Feeling the silence awkward, Charlatan said: "This is an* historic moment."

He looked round at the circle of faces, the faces of people who had just been entrusted with a mission of cosmic importance. He must get to know them, he felt. He must care for them, consider their tastes and foibles, he must win their love and draw from them all that was best and worthiest; he must mould them into a team worthy of Sir Arnold's confidence.

Hilda, slender and appealing Hilda, with that intelligent, upturned nose and those innocent yet ambivalent eyes; Q. Brute, smiling and bubbling with joy at the thought of devoting the remainder of his life to the service of humanity; † Dennis Tripod, reclining at ease on his shooting stick and rolling a cigarette, trying hard, Charlatan felt, to look nonchalant, but in reality fighting a desperate rearguard action to stem the emotion surging within him; and Joe Snagg, simple, honest Joe, bewildered, no doubt, but determined to play his part in the great adventure.

But where was Picklewit? The wretched fellow had sneaked off down the road and was now gazing greedily through the A.B.C. window.

* He was careful to pronounce the "an" with exquisite clarity.

† This is Q. Brute through Charlatan's eyes, of course, readers. You and I know the beast better.

"It is not often one has the privilege——" Charlatan began.

"Ere," put in Joe, "I want a word with you. Let's ave some char."

He led the way into the A.B.C. Charlatan watched the team proudly. Q. Brute rolled so heavily that everyone he passed had to jump into the gutter or press himself flat against a shop window. D. Tripod didn't so much walk, you understand, as McGollop along with the aid of his shooting stick. And pretty little Hilda click-clacked with a purposefulness which filled Charlatan with *je ne sais quoi*.*

As they grabbed buns from a plate piled a foot high and Joe drank his tea with long sucks, gasping and wiping his mouth on his sleeve after each suck, Charlatan slapped Picklewit on the back, for the fellow had not uttered a word since leaving Sir Arnold's sanctum. "Cheer up, Pickle," he said. "Overwhelmed, eh? But I knew it would happen. I've always had a firm faith that we would make good."

Picklewit grunted. He was watching with a disgusted air as Hilda sipped with little finger extended. "Make good what?" he snarled. "Good buns, for instance? Or tea-cups? Or objets d'arts or feather darts? Make good cricketers, waiters, beachcombers, or good horps?"

Joe clattered his cup emphatically. "It'll be a washout," he said. "Mark my words, a proper ruddy washout."

"But Mr. Snagg——" Charlatan remonstrated.

"Yerss it will. I've worked for this outfit before. Cold bleedin nights on the Great North Road with that ruddy pantechnicon. What's it all for, that's what I want to know—what's it all *for*?"

"I thought Sir Arnold made it quite clear," said Charlatan loftily.

"Clear as mud. Ere, ask *er*, she knows all about it, she's worked for old Springthorpe, too." He p'inted at Hilda with his spoon.

"Well, my dumpling, what do you know?" gurgled Q. Brute, shaking the table in his ecstasy.

* And if the authors can't *sais quoi*, who can?

"Sir Arnold is a very good employer," Hilda said primly. "A bit vague sometimes, of course."

"Vague!" snorted Joe. "What about the time you ran out of typewriter ribbon. What did e send you? Go on, tell em!"

"It *was* a bit funny," said Hilda. "He sent me a hundred yards of hair ribbon. But he didn't mean to. It's because he's so busy."

"Too busy to know what he's doing," said Joe. "Seven months I spent in the Outer Hebrides with that bleeding pantehnicon—e'd forgot all about me! Ow did he think I was to live—on bleedin sealmeat? Oh yes, e'll send air ribbon right enough but e won't send *cash*!"

"I don't think you should use language like that in front of Miss Houri," said Charlatan.

"She can always turn er back," said Joe, and roared with laughter. "She's used to me, Hilda is. Bloody well got to be."

"I do hope she'll soon get used to me too," said Q. Brute, pinching her bottom. She gave the nicest, most enticing little squeak and rolled her eyes round three times.

"Well, I want to know two things afore I start," said Joe, thumping the table. "Wot's me duties ~~and~~ wot's me pay. Wivaht answers to them questions I'm not budging an inch."

"Me neither; that is to say, I *do* agree," said Tripod.

"Well, the dutics are obvious," said Charlatan. "We are to travel the length and breadth of Britain and conduct an enquiry, a symposium so to speak, enunciate and interpret the nodal values, as it were; I mean, it's surely obvious."

"Not with my pantehnicon you don't," said Joe, closing his eyes tight.

"Perhaps the other gentleman can be more helpful," said Tripod, looking at Picklewit.

"Of course," said Picklewit, having devoured the last bun. "We'll go to some luckless village and organise an exhibition."

"Exhibition?" said Charlatan reprovingly. "What kind of exhibition?"

"Any kind of exhibition," said Picklewit. "What the devil does it matter? We've got to do *something*, obviously; it

doesn't make any difference what. It's not our fault if we haven't been told what we're *meant* to do."

"But we *have* been told," said Charlatan impatiently. "We are to carry out a survey of—of—sort of ways of life, you know, Institute of Public Opinion and that sort of thing."

"I've got plenty of photographs," Tripod said. "Engaged couples, wedding groups and family birthday gatherings."

"And I'll do graphs, charts, tables and plans," said Q. Brute merrily, squeezing closer than ever to Hilda. "I can prove anything by statistics."

"We're getting off the main subject," said Joe. "You don't start mending punctures when the gasket's blown. I don't mind bringing the old pantechnicon along for an exhibition—so long as it's approved," he added doubtfully. "Though I dare say I'll run out of petrol, like I always do. There's a great demand for TV these days," he went on vaguely. "I dare say they'll all like to see your exhibition. After all, they watch cricket, how to make pottery and Andy Bleedin Pandey. Your stuff can't be worse, I suppose. But what about the pay. That's a delicate point, that is, and a ruddy important one, to my way of thinking. And I don't want no evasions. Let's have top dead centre and no nonsense."

"I resent that aspersion cast against cricket," snapped Tripod. "Cricket is the finest expression of the British character."

"We haven't discussed pay yet," said Charlatan hurriedly. "We shall have to see Sir Arnold again."

• "Then I'm withdrawing me pantechnicon," Joe said. "I shouldn't mind betting the old boozer's in Paris already. I thought you was in charge of this outfit, mission, exhibition or whatever it is. Driver's seat vacant, if you ask me."

"Naturally we're in charge," Picklewit said suddenly. "We have full authority and make our own decisions. What do you want?"

"Seven quid a week," said Joe slyly. "After all, you got them motor bikes, didn't you?"

"We'll make it eight," said Picklewit, "provided you do exactly as you're told, when you're told and how you're told."

"And free grub."

"Free grub it shall be."

"And reasonable expense allowance?"

"Of course."

"Regular change of underwear?"

"I draw the line at underwear. Mr. Brute?"

Quintus rubbed his hands together, whispered to Hilda: "My name is Quintus but you can call me Quin," and then proceeded smoothly: "As you know, I'm a statistician. I'm always being called in by political parties, garden parties, temperance societies, Rotarians, international friendship leagues, Esperanto enthusiasts, smoke and anti-smoke sodalities, philanthropic bodies, philanthropic heads, rich cranks and religious orders to prove that something is or is not something else. I did, on one occasion, prove by figures that a dog's bark is worse than its bite. I command a very high price. White and black are only shades of grey, and this is worth bearing in mind, for only a statistician can so adapt these facts as to indicate that black is white and vice versa, with more vice than versa, eh my dear, if I have anything to do with it?" He pinched Hilda's bottom again. "I am one of the most essential technicians, if not *the* most essential technician, in modern society. But I do not wish to be extortionate. Indeed, in view of the supreme human value of this undertaking, I am prepared to charge less than my lowest rate on any former occasion. Shall we say £2,000 per annum?"

"Done," said Picklewit. "Mr. Tripod?"

"That was a slip of the tongue," said Quintus. "I intended to say £3,000 per annum."

"Mr. Tripod?" said Picklewit.

"I think it would not be underestimating my talents," Tripod said guiltily, "if I claimed that in some sort and to a large extent I can photograph anything in such a way as to make it look like anything else. I could for example persuade the Archbishop of Canterbury to look like a concentration camp commandant, and Rocky Marciano to resemble a Vicar distributing sweets to the children on a Sunday school outing. Of course, I hasten to add that I would do no such thing.

But I *could* show you a picture, which came into my hands purely by chance, to indicate that Stalin was present at the Coronation."

"Name your price," said Picklewit.

Tripod looked at Quintus. "Er—I'll put it in the post," he said. "I am not given to discussing money matters in public. I shall not be greedy, naturally, but I have my family to consider."

"And I'll put an amendment in the post," said Quintus. "Anything, so long as I can be with this delightful creature." He stroked Hilda's hand.

"Oh, you *are* forward," she said.

"Yes, a real roving centre-forward, that's me," he replied.

"Miss Houri?" Picklewit demanded. "What are your terms?"

She giggled. "Oh, what a question!" she said. Then she collected herself (not that she spread much, bless her—we'll give you her measurements later) and remarked efficiently: "My salary is laid down by my union. Mr. Picklewit."

"Which is?" rapped Picklewit. (Charlatan sat open-mouthed at his friend's straight-to-the-point, race-you-there-and-back methods.)

"The national union of Notaries and Shorthand Secretaries," she said. Then she added coyly: "We call it the Nuns."

Quintus roared with laughter. "Nuns," he shouted. "I'll take the vow, anything you like, sweetheart." The crockery rattled in sympathy.

Hilda shoved at him with her shoulder. "I'll have to ask for protection from this brute, Mr. Picklewit," she said, peeking sidelong at Quintus from her molten orbs.

"There will be no immorality on this mission," Picklewit rapped out. "All I ask is single-heartedness, wooden-headedness, patience and a pack of cards. Now off with you. Meet us tomorrow morning at five o'clock sharp in Trafalgar Square. Bring all your equipment. —pantechnicon, camera, pencils, slide-rules, typewriter, TV apparatus and buns." He waved his hand towards the door.

Quintus, Tripod and Hilda went out whispering together. "Knows what he wants, that young fellow," Tripod said.

"So do I," ejaculated Quintus in a high-pitched, frothy gurgle.

"He's awfully nice," said Hilda.

"I can't quite make the other chap out," Tripod said. "Obviously a gentleman but perhaps—er—a little *dim*."

"Oh, he's spiritual," Hilda said. "I like him too."

Meanwhile Joe Snagg had stayed behind for a last word. "Don't blame me if I'm not there on the dot," he said. "Wouldn't be the first time I'd broke down. Got to check me tools first."

"You'll be there," said Picklewit.

"I'll be there!" snorted Joe. "Ar, an praps I won't. Trouble with blokes like you is you think blokes like me can always fire on every cylinder, but sometimes our valves need grinding and our plugs cleaning and our points an all. Ar, but you aint got earts, you just got faulty coils, that's all. And I don't like the way you imply disrespect and distrust, neither, for the poor old pantehnicon by asking for them motor bikes; my pantehnicon can carry undreds."

"It isn't your pantehnicon, it's the mission's, and don't you forget it, you lazy slob," snapped Picklewit. "Five o'clock, Trafalgar Square." He watched Joe slouch away grumbling and then said to Charlatan: "There'll be trouble with that lugworm if we're not firm. He's a slacker."

"I say old man," Charlatan said uneasily, "aren't you being a bit harsh, I mean? After all, if you knew anything at all about man-management you would know you can't bully them like this."

"Can't I?" said Picklewit. "You just watch. You won't get anything out of that crowd of crooks without bullying them."

"But Sir Arnold stressed the high moral tone of this enterprise. He implied that it would strike a blow for British prestige. He seemed to suggest that what we are doing is almost—well, it's like a religious brotherhood setting out to cover England with a net of holiness. I mean, we can't abuse his trust, can we?"

"Yes," said Picklewit. "Or at least we could if he had any but he hasn't. First of all we've got to find out what the old scoundrel really wants, and then not do it. Until we've discovered that, our main job is to keep the organisation, if you can call it that, together. That will take some doing what with Snagg's pantechnicon and Brute pinching Hilda's bottom every chance he gets. You ought to be thankful this paper gives us authority to indent for a motor bike each."

"That's just it, though," Charlatan groaned. "How are we going to *pay* them all?"

"You can pay them with a handful of Sir Arnold's sacred trust every week," sneered Picklewit. "The only thing is to get them all into some out-of-the-way hole, then we'll be able to knock some sense into them and keep them away from pubs, shops and so forth. We'll pour Golden Syrup into the pantechnicon's sump and keep the bikes locked up, then we'll have them at our mercy."

"But what's the good of that?" wailed Charlatan.

"What's the good of anything? Give me a night to think it over and I'll let you know."

"Oh, if only our instructions were clear," Charlatan sighed.

"And our cash adequate," added Picklewit. "The main thing is to *start*. It doesn't matter where."

Little did Charlatan and Picklewit know of the foul net of intrigue into which they were being led. If your nerves are already jumpity, turn to Chapter Seven (the High Class chapter) specially written for softies. But if you can stand tension and horror, stumble straight ahead.

CHAPTER FOUR

*In which a fine old English gentleman
is saved by a Revolting Pantechnicon*

"WHERE ARE WE?" said Charlatan, pushing up his goggles and goggling round at the gangrenous huddle of buildings which beset him round with dismal storeys.

"Who cares?" bawled Picklewit above the glib gargantuan patter of clattering tappets and pistonic slappery.

"But——" said Charlatan and twiddled nervously at the twist grip, accidentally letting in the clutch as he did so; his machine rocketed off down the street, careered across the traffic lights against red, upset an apple cart and vanished in a cloud of blue smoke.

Picklewit cut his engine and waited with resignation; ten minutes later Charlatan staggered back on foot. "Had to hide the bike in a timber yard," he said. "The police were after me." He chewed his finger-nails. "It's all your fault, this is a deadly town, and I don't understand motor bikes."

"A good thing it is deadly," Picklewit said, "for that makes it a target for Livening Up tactics and after all we're on a Livening Mission, aren't we? We'll go and see the Mayor. But first we need a cup of tea."

As they gobbled and gulped Charlatan said: "We were only issued with ten quid, and that won't last long, you know, Pickle. Besides, we really can't do anything until the others arrive."

"They won't arrive at all, if you ask me," Picklewit said through a vast bun. "They hopped on the train at Euston with Bulchester as target and there's an end of them. I can't

see Snagg ever getting here in that lumbering old pantechnicon. And where this is I've no idea, anyhow. Hey, waitress dear, what is this town?"

The girl sniggered. "A dump," she said. "Ducky."

"Yes but what's the name of it?"

"If you aven't been in Bulchester you aven't been born," she said.

"What a coincidence," Picklewit said. "E.S.P. I expect. But that's not the point, the others don't matter, what does matter is that we've got official authorisation to do this and that, we can go where we like, Sir Arnold's a skinflint and a bounder and won't let us have a penny if he can help it, so it's up to us to use our position for what it's worth and organise our own finances. You leave it to me."

"No no no. We don't want to end in jail! After all, I mean to say, good gracious, Picklewit, we have our mission to fulfil, Great Horps, and——"

"Exactly. I'm fulfilling it by getting a hotel room and having a good long sleep in the bosom of the deep."

"Oh, but good muffins, what about the Mission?" interposed Charlatan. "Shouldn't we interview the Mayor and explain to him the nature of our solemn trust? I cannot let you sleep, Picklewit, until this has been accomplished."

Picklewit munched moodily. "Oh all right," he said. "We'll tell the Mayor we're going to organise an exhibition. What have we got? Nothing. What's the nearest thing to nothing we can exhibit? Vacuist painting, which makes a virtue of non-existence. Very well, then, we must organise an exhibition of Vacuist painting. Pretty easy, since we only need frames with air in them."

"But there won't be any good reports of an exhibition like that, I mean Jonathan Dean went to jail and we all got into hot water over Vacuism, Picklewit, our ideals weren't appreciated. And if the reports are bad Sir Arnold will tell the police all about that business of Major Bilborough's library."

"Where's your idealism, Charlatan?" Picklewit said sternly. "Pull yourself together. Is this the talk of a crusader?"

Besides, we've got Sir Arnold in a cleft stick; he pretends he liked Vacuism, and he's got to keep up the pretence. He's given us a crowd of rubbishy off-scourings as assistants, and only engaged *us* because he believes we're scoundrels and reprobates, though as a matter of fact you're just a simpleton and a nincompoop and I'm as noble-minded a raven as ever swindled a bus-conductor. But anyhow, what does it all mean, would you say? Eh, Charlatan? Easy. He wants us to fake the evidence, that's what it means. He wants false statistics from that filthy bounder Brute, faked photographs from that oddity Tripod and mythical fictitious and factitious reports from us. Very well, we *will* fake the evidence. And if we do that we've caught him, Charlatan, because we can always tell him that if he splits on *us* we'll split on him and his name will be cultural mud. And if he says he engaged us in good faith and we behaved like cads, we'll say 'Look at our records. Would *anyone* engage us in good faith?' And in any case he would never recover from the scandal. Everything's going to be fine."

They plunged into the streets of Bulchester, and stood at last before the Town Hall, an asylum sprouting plaster blitherage.

"But Pickle, you're so reckless," Charlatan protested. "You simply can't go to see the Mayor wearing that flying suit and those goggles and gauntlets."

"Nonsense," said Picklewit and struggled up the steps one two three four like a diver moving along the ocean bed.

"I can go in wearing aluminium suspenders if I want."

Charlatan, laden with forebodings and fivebodings as well, quailing with misgivings and generally out of sorts, gambolled guiltily behind. When he heard Picklewit loudly fluting through the Enquiries window: "Town clerk in? Tell him Sir Arnold Springthorpe's cultural circus wants to see him and examine his credentials," Charlatan's nerve broke with a tinkle. He fled away down the arches of the years and hid in a telephone kiosk. Two tug-faced bargees arrived anxious to make a call to their union, and peered hungrily through the glass, rapping and tapping with their shillings. Desperately

Charlatan lifted the receiver and appealed to the operator for Sir A. Springthorpe's number. He found himself in conversation with a bun-baker in Bootle and finished by ordering three bags of currant buns to be sent by express post to the Dumbell Hotel, Bulchester. When he eventually got Sir Arnold's secretary he had inserted five shillings and sixpence in the box and was limp with exertion.

"Sir Arnold has flown to Paris. Your instructions are in the post," the secretary intoned. "Ring again on Thursday." She cut him dead.

Gone to Paris? Had not Joe Snagg warned them of this? Was Picklewit right after all? Ought they to have made enquiries about Sir Arnold before accepting the job? Who was to say where this would all end?

There was now a queue outside the kiosk and voices were calling: "Come on out of it, Skinny, before I roast your liver! Wag your tongue a bit sharpish, Shark-face, if you want to keep your teeth. . . . Put a sock in it, boozy, we haven't got till Friday week. . . . Look lively or we'll wrap your legs round the lamp-post, bat-ears. . . . Let's have some action, Scraggy, me feet urts. Press Button B! Fetch a copper and get him locked up! Yank im out, the perisher!"

Charlatan was so upset by the brutal glowering faces of these fanatical Bulchester kioskers that he dared not emerge and began to wish he had chosen to gatecrash the Town Hall with the egregious Picklewit. When a fight broke out between a man who asserted that Charlatan was a knock-kneed sniveller who needed his nose bending and a fellow who held the contrary view that he was a mildewed stick of liquorice whose ears should be used as pen-wipers, a policeman appeared uttering the magic formula "What's all this?" which he had learned from listening to radio plays, and Charlatan took advantage of the revolting confusion to slither away. He hurried to the timber yard, ever and anon casting behind him like a hare in a paper-chase a fear-frenzied look, dug out his motor bike from beneath a pile of slats, bucketed away and booked a room for Picklewit and himself at the Dumbell Hotel.

As he stole softly from the Victorian box to which an old man in braces had introduced him, he slabbed heavily into Dennis Tripod, who bounded twelve feet six and a half inches rearward with the aid of his shooting-stick and cried in a terror-stricken voice: "Mr. Charlatan!"

"Ah, Tripod, so you've made it," Charlatan remarked, with the best air of employership he could muster.

"Made it?" said Tripod. "Er? What? Oh! My goodness! Rootletedoo! You don't mean to infer that I was *intended* to meet you in this very spot, Mr. Charlatan?"

"Well, there's no need to be so particularly precise, Tripod," Charlatan replied, somewhat nettled, "Not necessarily in this very spot here, you know, but in this hotel, certainly, and in this town, yes, why, definitely, of course, indeed so, good gracious."

Tripod seemed twiddly and all of a dotard at this news. "It's my training," he explained with worried mien. "My past misfortunes have been such, so dogged am I by mis-happage that, Mr. Charlatan, but for my love of photography and cricket, were I not of sterling stuff composed, I should long since have returned my negative to the divine developer. . . ."

"I *do* wish you would come to the point," Charlatan said. "Besides, we can't stand chattering in this corridor all night. Let's slink into the lounge—and please mind what you're doing with that shooting-stick, it's dangerous, you've already damaged the wallpaper and injured my ankle." (You must forgive Charlatan his unusual shortness of temper; he had been through a trying experience.)

"I beg you to say nothing harsh or hasty against my shooting-stick, Mr. Charlatan. Without that splendid manufact I should never have been able to stabilise the camera with which I took the famous photograph of Compton Mackenzie dipping his beard in Lady Worlington's teapot, which established my fame, nor should I have scored my notorious and ineffable o not out for I Zingari against the Australians in 1927. My legs are not strong, you see, and by resting on my shooting stick *thus* I was enabled to play my back defen-

sive stroke from a well-nigh recumbent position, and remained in from 3.20 on Saturday evening until 6.30 on the following Monday without scoring, thus forcing a resounding draw."

"Quite quite quite quite," Charlatan said with some asperity, "but what has all this to do with whatever it was you were talking about?"

Reaching the so-called lounge he accosted a leather-covered armchair which launched a fusillade of springs against his shiny trousers. Tripod opened his shooting-stick and took up his batting stance with a grievous air of pride and prejudice.

"I will explain," he said, blinking and winking with covert intensity. "My many bewildering and fantastic experiences have taught me one infallible rule: Never do what is expected of you. Heed my warning, Mr. Charlatan, if you ever do anything, never do anything which you are scheduled to do; if you make this mistake you play straight into their hands, just as one who, over-inclined to indulge in the cut, places the ball into the hands of slip or gully. Ah, they know where to lie in wait, do they not, Mr. Charlatan, lead piping in hand, and wreathed in terrible smiles?"

"Good heavens," replied Charlatan, wishing Picklewit would appear to rescue him.

Tripod gave the interruption no heed. "So of course, naturally, I always burn or forget instructions as soon as I receive them and set out for somewhere other than the place wherever it is for which I am intended to set out, but since I have forgotten the name of the place for which I was intended to set out, well dash it, I sometimes go there by mistake—you see how hideously subtle the fiends can be, Mr. Charlatan. Yes, their horrendous cleverness is proved, Mr. Charlatan, by the simple and irregular fact that here, after all, I am. How, you ask, did this come about, how did the immemorial monsters lure me here? Ah, the fearsome twining artifice of the servants of the imponderable, Mr. Charlatan! As I rested in the train, wondering within the whirligig of my container where I might wend my way, I heard a voice in the corridor utter these words: 'It's no bloody use your going to Bulchester, Fred, the place is dud as a dishrag.' 'Ah,

Bulchester,' thought I, 'chance has directed me to thee!' Little did I know that chance can be but another word for FIENDS. So here have I hied me, prepared for the furtherance of the Mission's worthy aims. Only to discover YOU, Mr. Charlatan, dreadful sight, lurking ominously in the passage, and to realise once more, grammar and/or syntax notwithstanding, how diabolically I had been tricked by those demonic agencies."

"What demonic agencies, Tripod?" Charlatan threw tremulous glances which recoiled from walls and doors and wavered at windows, flickering, flocking, flickering, etc. like unto fading ghosts at the twitching hour of dawn, like unto flocculent myths, flittering, fluttering, snithering away into the crannies of nothingness. . . .

"Why, those demonic agencies which control our lives, Mr. Charlatan."

Charlatan's nerves were frayed and tingling, as should be stumpily obvious by now we would have thought;* so unhinged and shatterpated was he that he allowed himself to venture towards the forbidden ground of sarcasm, upon which hitherto e ad not trod. "You haven't a photograph of these feinds,† Tripod, have you?"

Tripod's eyes gleamed with joy. "Oh, hundreds," he carolled. "Hundreds. Nay, thousands. Look, I'll show you." He tugged a fat wallet from a nearby poacher's pocket and withdrew from the wallet a photograph of a long lean lachrymose gump with an enormous nasal edifice standing beside a bed clad in a pair of baggy pyjamas. (The fellow himself was clad in bedclothes, naturally.)

"Who on earth is that?" Charlatan said. "The nose seems familiar."

"Aha!" Tripod remarked, winking and blinking forty to the score. "It's just that nosy familiarity which proves my point, if such there be, Mr. Charlatan. You don't know the being, yet his nose seems familiar. A fiend! And look at this."

* And in fact *do* think, thus: Think.

† Charlatan's spelling was always poor.

He handed Charlatan a photograph of a grizzled uniformed fellow extending a huge hand towards the camera.

"Er—well," Charlatan said, "the *hand* gives one an odd sort of feeling, I admit."

"Exactly," said Tripod. "A fiend's hand always does."

At that moment piston-slapping, tappeting and backfiring erupted in the street outside.* Charlatan rushed with wild surmise to the window and saw, as indeed he had feared he would, the outrageous Picklewit bent low over the handlebars of his machine, which whizzed out of sight pursued by a bevy of police motor cyclists at a spanking lick. Charlatan, indulging in a mode of behaviour which by now you will have begun to expect from him, twitched, went almost pale, reeled, groaned, staggered, moaned, and fell back horror-stunned.†

"The fiends are after Mr. Picklewit?" Tripod calmly enquired.

"Not the fiends, Tripod, the police," gasped Charlatan.

In one single shooting-stick-propelled boundelay Tripod hornstrumpeted through the *ouvrèd porte*.

Charlatan closed his eyes and uttered a gentle masp.‡ His eyes were still closed and he was still uttering similar masps when a boy stumped in and yelled: "Charlatan! Phone!"

Picklewit's voice gangled down the wire. "Never say Joe Snagg is a useless gumboil again, Charlatan," he said severely. "In doing so in the past you have fallen ber' with yourself and sat on your own head, my lad."

"Picklewit!" replied his friend in consternation. "What has happened? Where are you? What shall I do? Whuffo?"§

"Be patient," Picklewit replied. "I made a mistake. I talked to a chap I thought was the Town Clerk and he said 'They don't like Art in Bulchester. Why not have a Beauty Contest instead of an exhibition?' And I suddenly saw it wasn't the Town Clerk but his secretary, one of those organising

* Owing to the fact that the street *was* outside. It's most irritating to have to explain *everything* to you. Wake up!

† See Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, *passim*.

‡ A mixture of a moan and a gasp.

§ See "*Pogo Possum Comic*," *passim*.

women who looks like a box in a double-breasted jacket. So of course I knew what she wanted and started to measure the old harridan. The Town Clerk entered inopportunately, and took umbrage. I asked him to put it back and he was very rude. I drew myself up. I told him his tone was boorish and smelt of fish-glue. He requested me to leave. I told him he must apologise or fight a duel. I lifted a fountain-pen and threatened to squirt him with ink. He sent for the commissioner. I squirted the commissioner with ink. He became hostile. I hopped into another room which turned out to be reserved for Ladies. An old harridan screamed and they sent for the police. I hurtled subtly through the back exit and hurled myself into the saddle like Gary Cooper in his younger days. They were after me, closing the gap, Charlatan, I was flat out and overheating, done for, a goner, sunk, and then—who saved my bacon? No, not Shakespeare, as you were about to remark, Charlatan, that's an old joke, it was jolly old Joe Snagg with his ruddy pantechnicon in glorious pantechnicolour, which was rumbling and humbling towards Bulchester like a wheeled rhinoceros. As I passed by on the other side Snagg, with incredible skill, slewed the great pan across the road and the police were foiled, tumbling off into the ditch with a splendid sound of snapping bones and what not. Good old Joe! I'll give him a theoretical rise in wages as soon as I see him. But, however, I can't come back to Bulchester, not with things as they are; I'm a wanted man with a price on my head. You'll have to skedaddle pronto and tell the mob to follow. Light out while the going's good, make for Easthampton and keep your wits about you. Don't let yourself be followed. Stay at the Fat Bull." With that the incorrigible bounder rang off.

Charlatan locked himself in his bedroom until the evening post arrived, dragging in its wake a package from Sir Arnold Springthorpe. Inside the package was a document commencing thus: "Non-Entropification of British Culture. Statistical Account: Increase in educative fervour, rise of intelligence quota; proof of general psycho-physical upgrading; improved cultural morale, etc.

"Photographic Record : Britain in a new light. Decay to new creed inside a decade. New houses. New faces. Progress. Pictures of Sir Arnold Springthorpe.

"Reports on Social Sense, local achievement, mass jollity, etc." But we simply can't be bothered to record any more of the drivel.

There was also a cheque for five pounds and a note :

"Picklewit and Charlatan. Private. Urgent. Personal. The enemies of our country will stop at nothing, not even pedestrian crossings, to discredit me by destroying or desecrating this sacred Mission. Beware of middle-eastern spies, of the League of Handonose. Do not get into trouble with the police. Report regularly, ensure publicity, avoid loose women.

Springthorpe."

Charlatan returned the missive to its envelope with shaking hand and looked up expecting to see Sheikh Handonose advancing upon him cap à pied. Instead he saw Joe Snagg.

"I've arrove," said Joe Snagg, "which is more'n what you deserve. Had to drain the sump at Twittery Parva and pump a tyre at Livercastle which is enough to strain me cardiac motor in itself. And then I was just cruising into Bulchester safe as you like at a nice forty-two, five hours before I could be expected to bother, when oo should nearly put paid to me insurance book and shove me in the ditch good and proper but that raving ruddy Mr. Picklewit charging along on a blinding 650 sidevalve; and all I could do was yank the wheel like this ere, step on the brake like this ere, and blow the horn like this ere. . . ." He contorted himself as he spoke. "So I saved the pantechnicon from a fate worse than death. But the police didn't like it, Mr. Charlatan, all piled up as they was like sardines on toast, and it's not right, is it, I'm telling you, they was proper upset which is no more'n what you couldn't wonder considering the crude bloody way that Picklewit nearly put us all in the scrapyard."

Charlatan staggered to the door. "No more, no more,"

he bleated. Reeling outside he heaved open the door of the pantechnicon. "We're starting at once for Easthampton. At once! At once!" He tripped over the recumbent and canoodling forms of Hilda Houri and Quintus Brute. "Horrible! Horrible!" said Charlatan, like one who has read too much Mauriac.

CHAPTER FIVE

*In which two English gentlemen
encounter the Gallup Pole*

AFTER THIS THERE issued from the divine publishers a further edition of calamities, enough to shake people with more resolution than Picklewit and Charlatan out of their devotion to the Non-entropification of Britain.

To begin with they bought a map of England in Bowsted and Grumpily's, stationers and mole-trap suppliers, East-hampton, to show the others the route they intended—or, rather, as Charlatan explained to Tripod, to put him at his ease, the many routes they did *not* intend—to follow. Unfortunately they left it lying on the table at the Fat Bull and the maid, thinking it was a table-cloth, sent it to the laundry, from which it came back looking like chewed sacking.

Unable to afford another they made sketch-maps on scrappets of paper—the backs of letters, bills, blank pages torn from books in the lounge and so forth—but in their enthusiasm also used portions of their instructions from Sir Arnold and, of course, never saw these again. Charlatan urged the others to be more careful, responsible and so on but although they all looked rather ashamed of him matters didn't improve. Joe Snagg was seen, only five minutes after one of Charlatan's most impassioned pep-talks, eating sandwiches out of his sketch-map, which had been rendered illegible by dripping. Quintus wrote a billet-doux to Hilda on his and shoved it under her door. She was too proud to

notice it, so that Charlatan finally picked the thing up when the wind blew it into the corridor.

When this is all done and I've made money

All I want to do is build a

Little house with bees and honey

And settle down to tickle Hilda

This is from my heart, believe me,

Your devoted Quin.

After several days in close conference Charlatan and Picklewit decided to do nothing whatever—that is, Picklewit decided and Charlatan acquiesced with grumblage—except to collect material on the way to wherever they seemed to be going when they started out. What they collected Picklewit didn't seem to care a hirple. As he said, so long as we start it doesn't matter where we go, if we keep right on we're bound to get somewhere in the end. He sang some song of Harry Lauder's to this effect and though it didn't bring the house down it did bring plaster from the ceiling.

The day they were due to start rain began to pelt and stream. Joe came into the lounge looking his nastiest. "It's raining plugs and starting-handles," he said. "I know what that means."

"It means it's wet, no doubt," said Picklewit, not even glancing up from the football reports, which he was reading recumbent on a divan with his feet upraised.

"It means the ruddy pantehnicon will get stuck. Always does when it rains."

"You've got a spade," said Picklewit.

"Yes, but it's broke."

"Buy another."

"Then give us the money."

"Put it on the account. It's no use running to us every time you want a bit of ready cash. We're not money-bags."

"Always the same on this job," Joe grumbled. "Spend half the time wheedling tanners for maintenance. I sometimes wonder if you blokes even know how a pantehnicon works."

"Your pantehnicon doesn't work, Snagg, that's just the trouble," Picklewit replied frostily. "It idles. It lazes. It lags, Snagg. And how dare you say we know nothing about pantehnicons? We invented them. I was born in one and brought up in another. My mother was one of the Berkshire pantehnicons. Now off you go, Snagg, we hear altogether too much from you these days."

Joe left the room mumbling something about fly-wheels.

"I say old chap don't you think you might get their backs up with that sort of approach?" Charlatan said nervously.

"Yes. What would you do? Get their bottoms down?" Picklewit crudely retorted.

"Well, I would appeal to their better natures. I believe there is a streak of goodness, an altruistic vein, a desire to serve humanity, in every——"

The door opened and in popped Hilda, pouting, making moues and that kind of thing.

"It's all very well, Mr. Picklewit," she began stormily, then stopped appalled, raising a delicate hand to her mischievous mouth, shocked—the poor little dear—by her own impetuosity. "Oo, I'm sorry, really, I shouldn't have flown off the Handel like that, I know," she said, dimpling. "But it's my sense of duty. I haven't done a stroke of work since we started and it makes me awfully uncomfortable—you know, well, sort of getting money by false preñces if you know what I mean."

"Money?" said Picklewit sharply. "Where have you been getting money?"

"Oh, well, I haven't exactly *had* any money yet, but I know I shall."

"Thank heavens for that," said Picklewit. "So you want work, eh? Very creditable I shouldn't wonder. I only wish some of the others were filled with the same zeal and delicious padding."

"Oh so do I, Mr. Picklewit," she smiled.

"Have you got a notebook?"

"Oh yes." She whipped out several with a flourish. A scrap of paper fell to the floor, which Charlatan sprang to

catch,* believing it to be a pound note. It was only a corner torn off a maintenance manual for the pantehnicon; he scanned it and put it in his pocket.

"Take this down," said Picklewit. "To the Mayor of Mottleton. Sir, No doubt the present tour of the Springthorpe Cultural Mission for the Social Investigation of Entropic Allegations against Britain has not escaped your attention. It is with great pleasure that I inform you of our firm—er—howdyoudo—to proceed forthwith to Mottleton, dump thought it sounds, where we propose to hold a Carnival of Contemporary Art. We shall arrive on March 20th in the Mission's Red and Black Pantehnicon, and look forward with every confidence to a pleasant stay. Please reply to the Pig and Kettle at Hangover (Bucks). Yours faithfully, Picklewit. Send that off today."

"But Picklewit," said Charlatan, as usual. "I didn't know we were going to Mottleton!"

"Neither did I," said Picklewit. "But Mottleton it seems to be. Now Miss Houri, you're a delightful little apple-dumpling."

"Yes sir."

"Don't be impertinent. Take this down. Sirs, With reference to yours of the 11th ult. I beg to inform you that our order was for semi-Bordeaux not royal Windsor as received by this morning's post. Moreover, more than half the containers were broken and the contents spilled and largely evaporated. I should esteem it a favour if in future you would follow our instructions more closely and would use leather cartons instead of the waxed cardboard as heretofore. Anticipating your co-operation in this matter, I am, Sirs, yours faithfully, Picklewit. P.S. Regards to Mrs. Websaunders."

"Who's it to, sir?" asked Hilda.

"Oh, some wine merchant, probably. Use your initiative. We've no room in this organisation for people who continually want instructions."

"Yes, sir," said Hilda doubtfully.

"And Miss Houri. Type out a hundred or so letters more

* To catch the floor, naturally. Charlatan is no dunderhead.

or less on the same lines. Preferably less. In fact, say whatever you like, the ruder the better. We shall want them all when we really get going and lam into the attack."

"All to wine-merchants, sir?"

"No, girl, of course not. To cordwainers, tallow makers, book reviewers, deep-sea fishermen, trouser pressers, folk dancers, oriental mystics, Mr. Timothy Shy, everyone, even Bert Laggs."

Hilda left the room thoughtfully thinking and deep in thought.

"There's something different about that girl," Picklewit said. "Have you noticed it, Charlatan?"

"Noticed? Of course," cried Charlatan. "She's in love!"

"Oh for goodness' sake," said Picklewit, turning pale with disgust and wriggling on the divan like an eel in a lobster pot. "We haven't time for that sort of thing. That's where your idiotic theory of universal love leads you. Nowhere."

"It isn't *me* she's in love with," said Charlatan indignantly. "The very idea! It's Brute. Listen to this." He took out the scrap of paper he had picked up and read:

"Were every sage who lived of old
To join together in a jury
They'd give the palm, I make so bold,
For Beauty to Miss Hilda Hourie.
Sweet Naiad, I am all yours. Quin."

"Good Lord," said Picklewit. "How revolting. We'll have to keep those two apart. It's shocking. Odious. Brute can't come to Mottleton, that's obvious. Where shall we send him?"

"Er," said Charlatan. "I——"

"Be quiet. Don't bleat. Let me think. Yes! No . . . Wait! Yes! I've got it! We'll send him to Coventry. He deserves it. But Brute's attentions may explain what I noticed."

"What?"

"She's putting on weight!"

"Good heavens! Picklewit, she must have a secret store of food."

"Not very loyal, is it? Let's look up her details."

Picklewit opened a large artist's folder known as THE FILE. He turned over a few pages, thus: turn, and then murmured: "Ah! Thin as a rake she *was*. Bust 29, waist 18, hips 30. But she's more now. Charlatan, old boy, nip in and measure her. This might be one of the most important things we've stumbled on yet."

Charlatan fluttered his hands in the air like a French hair-dresser. "Really, my dear chap, how *can* I go in and start measuring a young lady, filled as she is with the pride of youthful womanhood and——"

"Oh, why is it I have to do all the things in this outfit?" groaned Picklewit. "Tell her it's for a Ministry of Labour form or something to do with the NUNS. There's nothing people love more than to have someone take an interest in them."

Picklewit was quite right. Hilda beamed when Charlatan appeared with a tape measure and stammered out that he needed her proportions for a Ministry probe. She stretched out her arms and closed her eyes and was not satisfied until Charlatan had measured her all over. "I simply adore the Welfare State," she sighed.

When Charlatan returned to the "inner office"* he had to wake Picklewit up. "I've taken every conceivable dimension and some I never knew existed, but the relevant ones are: Bozoom 30, waist 19, hips 31."

Picklewit blumberburated. "On second thoughts," he said, "we'll encourage this Brutish affair. Charlatan, give Brute every opportunity to be alone with Hilda. He must come to Mottleton after all."

"I don't see how this helps the organisation," said Charlatan loftily. "And that dreadful canoodling in the panttechnicon. Really!"

"You'll see," said Picklewit smugly.† "And don't be a prude."

* Picklewit's bedroom.

† Even if this absurd incident does bewilder you, there's no point in surrendering; you're well into Chapter Five so you might as well push on. Actually it's of cosmic if not international significance.

Next day The File, Hilda's compact, Charlatan's shaving brush and Picklewit's razor were carefully packed into a stolen cigar box by the lovely Miss Hourì and strapped to the back of Charlatan's motor bike. Amid cheers* the organisation roared away towards Mottleton, with Hilda clinging grimly to Picklewit's belt. Every half-hour Hilda and the cigar box changed pillions, so that no suspicion of favouritism should be roused in any breast.

They were delighted to reach the Pig and Kettle at Hangover (Bucks) that same day, because this jolly little hole had been on their schedule, and their arrival proved the efficiency of the organisation. The only trouble was that by late in the evening the pantechnicon loaded with Tripod, Snagg, Brute and all the paraphernalia still hadn't turned up. Instead came a spate of telegrams from Joe. The first read: "Stuck as expected." The second: "Sinking fast." The third: "Sunk."

In a furious rage Picklewit scribbled the following reply: "Get a crowbar you fool or a winch or a wench or a tender behind comma use initiative use tree trunk as lever if no tree trunk invent one do something job no sinecure disgusted Picklewit." Hilda was sent to the Post Office, on the grounds that the bosses' small change was at the bottom of the cigar box and they were too exhausted to unpack. But Hilda trilled a gay: "Pleasure I'm sure" and trod away with a light stippy-step and a twittering heart. She too had received a telegram:

Shooting with a dart young Cupid

Only struck but never killed a

Lovely girl; he was not stupid.

Had he not aimed at my dear Hilda?

I yearn for your arms. Tripod is no substitute. Q.

But alas, even the happiest chapters are sometimes doomed to drivel away in final inexpugnable desuetude. For now, just at the moment when Ocklewit and Owlstan's Mission appeared to be staggering towards some dung-hill peak or

* The hotel staff, glad to see the back of this riff-raff.



the wife of some bony young don at St. Joad's College, Paddington Green. "If you intend us harm, vamoose! If you but pose as the enemy of our country, speak! If you are an agent of those devilish forces whose god is so boldly named upon our wall, O speak! But speak not blackly. Speak not in tones of dread and devastating woe. Adopt the tongues of doves, of gentle cooing birds which croodle in the womb of evening like the zephyr from the south! Deliver us, O tight-enclosed, mysterious spirit from our stark uncertainty! If we are to die, then now declare it! We shall die with courage in our hearts and shouts of terror on our lips. From whatever hell of blasphemous intrigue you may derive, we are not afraid. O speak, damn it, can't you, we're fed-up with all this lecturing."

The stranger advanced across the room at a run, raising his knees curiously, like a horse. (Horses are inquisitive animals, but not so inquisitive as cows, which often eat celanese pants off the guy ropes of boy scouts' tents, where they (the pants) have been hung to dry, simply because they want to know what celanese pants taste like. The answer of course is: celanese pants.) Charlatan and Picklewit gibbered with courage.

"I am your freund scx," said the stranger in a deep bass voice. "I am the Gallup Pole Scx. Ally of your country in svoscx——"

"Svoscx?" said Picklewit unbelievably.

"Svoscx," reiterated the Pole.

"Oh, I thought you said 'svoscx,'" said Picklewit disgustedly. "Carry on."

"I come to offer my assistance against *le* conspiracy *sale* which you have been being about to, no, have being been about to rightly imagine to be aimed at the well-being about to, oh crackatervodsk! aimed at the good name of *votre patrie*——"

"Matrie, surely!" said Charlatan, shocked.

The Pole seemed to be growing a touch impatient. "Very well, in deference to your wishes," he said at last, with difficult courtesy, "intent upon the destruction of the mother

which put you to the breast and nurtured your—er—provided your free spectacles and—er—What have I said? I am one of the *schluchtertungs* of the age scx. I see my own country underfoot getrodden, gebeaten, gedespised, gecollectivised, gecorrupted, gedir—gesid—gedisrupted, gefoozled and *geschluffschloffgefahrenbahngefreuschutzgeschurturm*——” At this point the wretched fellow swallowed two ge’s and was brought to a halt for a minute and a half neighing helplessly. Then he rattled off: “I come to your aid as onæ day you will come to mine,” and mopped his brow with a yellow duster.

“Oh gallant Pole! Bravo!” sang Charlatan, sozzled with emotion. “Give me your hand.” He embraced the black figure in true continental style.

“What’s the meaning of this outrage?” Picklewit said.

“In short,” the Pole replied, “there is a conspiracy, the sole aim of which is to encompass the entrup—entrip—entropification of Britain. It is known as the *Bruderschaft* of Handonose scx. This *schwandeltreubisch* and degraded *mutterblutgeschliffendag* will stop at nothing. They live literally from hand to nose and a fig care they not for nobody scx. Their sign manual is the thumb to the nose with fingers extended. Having got wind of your excellent but rather schmelly scheme to prove the nonentrupentripentropification of Britain they themselves have set to destroy your organisation with entirement. They will leave not *une* trace ungeturned. You will vanisch absolutely scx.”

“Not *une* trace?” said Charlatan nervously.

• “Not a drop of *blutt*, not a nail, not a hair, not a jekyll, not a hide,* not a sigh, not a simper, not a scrippet or scrappet, not a *feschglugenschneiderlautnungbelugnegreut-schlaber*, not a scx,” said the Pole gravely. “But never fear. I will protect you.”

They started violently at a tap on the door—as who wouldn’t for we mean, a sink is the place for taps when all is said and done which unfortunately, it isn’t. A piece of paper slid into sight.

“You get it, Charlatan,” Picklewit ordered sharply.

* The Pole prided himself on his idiomatic English.

"N—no, you're nearer," said Charlatan.

The Pole galloped across the room and returned with the paper. "As I thought," he said gloomily, handing it to Picklewit. "THE END IS IN SIGHT. MAA ES SALAAM."

Picklewit fell back on the bed. "Our only hope lies locked in Hilda's expanding bosom," he cried. "Hilda must captivate these monsters with her charms and allure them to their doom."

"There is hope in me, scx," said the Pole with dignity.

"There may be hope in you but there's not much else except scx, *schwandeltribisch* and svoscx," Picklewit grouchily and ungratefully replied.

At this same moment Hilda was slithering coyly into bee-by-boes, singing to herself a weeny song and smiling at her own reflection in the mirror across the room. Every now and again she paused in her trilling to murmur: "Quin! Oh, Quin," and flung back her hair because it was so beautiful.

A tap, a tippety toppety tap did sound. For a moment her little heart stopped tripping along, then luckily it began again and she opened her eyes to observe a slip of paper sliding slowly O so slowly beneath the door. She inclined her head, smiled and said: "Dear foolish Quin" and twinkled from between the sheets to snatch the billet-doux. She snuggled down cosy and warm before opening it. O horror! O black enveloping dread!

The fools pretend that Hilda
Will never come to harm
But we'll provide a skilled a-
Ssassin, Maa es Salaam!

Hilda gave a squeak and fainted away.

CHAPTER SIX

*In which two English gentlemen
unveil a statue in porridge*

PICKLEWIT WAS SOMEWHAT surprised to receive from the Mayor a letter stating that Mottleton had prepared a reception for the Mission and that he (the Mayor) would be delighted should Mr. Picklewit consent to unveil a statue in the Market Place.

When the pantehnicon eventually arrived he called the team together and Charlatan delivered a graceful speech, appealing to them all to be on their best behaviour. Hilda, who was clutching Quintus' hairy paw, cried out irrelevantly: "Who is that horrid horrid *horrid* HORRID man in black? It was he who thrust a nasty note beneath my door. A HoRrId note. He is hORRId. Everything's hORrRRId. What would the Nuns say?"

"Sir," said Brute, glowering at the Gallup Pole, "if you've been shoving notes neath Hilda's door I warn you I'll calculate you into a minus quantity before you can express five positive integers."

"Stop yelping and growling and drivelling about," said Picklewit crossly. "This isn't a zoo, it's a ruddy cultural enterprise and the devil take the hindmost. We must stick together like Osbert and Edith, work hard, put our shoulders to the oars and our wheels to the grindstone and all that kind of grovelling idiocy or we're sunk. We've been to three towns so far as I remember, we've done absolutely nothing and sent no report to Sir Arnold. This won't do. Not only won't

it do but it won't not do either. It must stop. Or start. Not only have we failed ignominiously but we're pursued by carnivorous spies who dog our footsteps and catnap in our tracks. It wasn't this splendid gallant young nitwit who pushed a note under your door, Miss Hourri, it was some loathsome traitor or gangrenous enemy agent unnamed. He shoved one under *our* door too."

Tripod de-shooting stuck, or should we say stucked, with asperity. "Did I not warn you, Mr. Charlatan?" he cried in a ringing tone. "Did I not say: You will be caught in the slips if you continue to flash at balls outside the off stump? Did I not say you must cease to make plans, draw maps, prepare lists, and arrange schedules, time-tables and such horrifying blasphemies? Hands and noses, Noses and hands, it's always the same, the imponderable intervenes, the coal becomes ash, the sun grows cold, the earth stops, entropy seizes everything. . . ."

"Tripod!" Charlatan was quivering with righteous horror. "Are you seriously suggesting that entropy is a tolerable concept, a permissible expression, in short are you a traitor? You must realise, Tripod, that for we idealists it does not in the least matter whether a thing is true or not, all that matters is whether it fits or does not fit in with our ideals. Entropy does not. Down with entropy, Tripod. Denigrate it. Or better still, ignore it. I don't wish to call you rude names, as rude-name-calling is not in my nature and is against my principles, but how is it that you mentioned Hands and Noses before ever we received those sinister notes, Tripod? Surely you are not planning to betray us? Surely I do not find myself forced to classify you as: Renegade?"

"I draw myself up to my full height," Tripod replied. "I raise my shooting stick in defence of my honour and reject your allegations in toto, cast them back as it were in your teeth, conscious of my supreme purity of heart, and the unexampled rectitude of my conduct. I betray nobody. I simply photograph naked oddities, and play defensive strokes off the shooting-stick. There is no more to be said. Rest assured that I will do my utmost to reappear wherever it is

whenever it is at some time or another whenever it is particularly inconvenient, but nothing of this must be said, expressed in writing or even in thought. I am off to disguise myself as a snake and slither through the gully country before the enemy can place another fielder there. Goodbye!" With a single bound he belted out of bounds.

"Blown his gasket if you ask me," Joe Snagg said. "If it wasn't im as caused that horrible knock in the engine yesterday oo was it, I'd like to know, shoving his ruddy great shooting bloody stick in the works just to see there wasn't a perishing fiend in the carburettor. A proper cranky case that bloke, you carbonise my cylinder barrel if he aint."

"Excuse please," said the Gallup Pole, raising aloft a black-gloved hand. "I do not inscribe notes, scx. I have no time for such effete frivolities. Besides I should not on no account leave written evidence unless perhaps insoluble cipher, cryptograph or both. The hand is in every pie. The nose pierces everywhere. Beware of tall dark strangers with large noses and immense brown hands. I have spoken."

"You've all flaming well spoken a darn sight too much," roared Picklewit. "Let it be undersotterated and redundified straight away that this object"—he jerked a thumb towards the Pole, "is our officially appointed bodyguard and no more farinacious nonsense about it."

"Oo how nice," said Hilda. "I *do* hope he'll guard *my* body."

"With pleasure, Mademoiselle," the Pole replied, to Brute's manifest rage and disgust.

So with that awkward hurdle oerleapt they set forth for Mottleton, if not merry and bright at least less sorely surly than heretoforely.

Mottleton declared itself as a long grey High Street, a short grey Low Street, and a wide grey Market Square. A cold wind whistled shrilly hither, thither and otherwise. As the motor cycles tapped into the cobbled market place, Charlatan stared proudly about all agog and akimbo to salute nonchalantly the gathered populace. But there was no gathered populace, dash it, only three suited men beside a

draped bulge. Charlatan's lower lip quivered, his eyes moistened and two tears coursed, etc. etc. In short, he was disappointed. Picklewit, on the contrary, heaved his machine on to its stand and cantered across the cobbles uttering jovial shouts: "Why, if it isn't Stodge! Ahoo, Stodge, how's the porridge? Still as fat and oaty as ever, are you, no *reductio ad absurdum*, eh?"

The fellow thus addressed, a small round solemn tub, shook Picklewit by the ear with grave goggling charm. "Oh isn't it wonderful, Pickle," he said, "that after all these years we should meet on such a joyous occasion. Ah, both of us have come a long way since our Vacuist days. The Town Council actually asked me to create the statue of Mottleton Traditions which you are to unveil this very day. There is an oatmeal factory in Mottleton, you know, owned by a splendid public benefactor named McNab Mackenzie Murdoch Macleod Stebbins, so it's all indelibly suitable."

"One in your most daring style, I hope, Stodge? Modelled in good stiff porridge, I hope?"

"Why, of course! I'm faithful to me calling, you know Pickle, just as Jonathan is to his. With him it's webbing, with me it's porridge. I call meself repeatedly, that I do—'Stodge!' I call, 'Stodge,' only louder of course, and answer 'Here I am' and so forth every day. And this is my finest porridge sculpture to date."

"Ahem," carefully intoned a spectacled bloke in pinstripes. "The Mayor could not be present, fortunately, Mr. Er. Neither could anyone else. I am here, therefore, reluctantly of course, to feign some welcome to your silly nonsense on his behalf. When your sorry company is assembled I shall say a few words, as boring as possible, you will say a few words, stupid ones I expect, we shall unveil the—er—thing—and then pop off for lunch. What say?"

"Crack on, cock," said Picklewit. "And the fewer words the better. Here's the pantehnicon."

The vast compendium was indeed lumbering loutishly into view but before Joe Snagg could or would make up his mind

to bring it to a stop it brought itself to a ditto with a chuffle and a chug. Joe slumped from the cabin and grumbled loudly: "What the bloody ell is it *this* time?" He flung up the bonnet. With a galvanic giggle Hilda Houri sprang lightly through the rear door, saw the reception committee, gasped, wriggled and straightened her skirt. Brute, spruce and beaming, solemnly counted all those present.

"Not an impressive statistical return," he said, and squeezed one of Hilda's oft-enumerated limbs.

"All here?" said the spectacled bloke, viewing Brute with acute distaste. "Quite enough, by the look of them. Here goes. I reluctantly and against my better nature compel myself to extend a lukewarm welcome to the Springthorpe Cultural Mission and its numerous toadies, parasites and hangers-on, on behalf of the Borough of Mottleton. Your turn, Mr. Picklewit."

Picklewit placed one foot on the saddle of his motor bike and waved a gauntlet in slow aerial arcs as he spoke. "Lady, gentlemen and porridge-moulder," he began. "I take this unlikely opportunity to thank that pin-striped dummy for his frowsy speech and to add my denunciation of those foul snerging fruitarian rissoles who infest this country with their niggling grumbles and nattering dribbles of malicious gossip, casting aspersions here and aspersions there, splashing and defacing the fair name of British culture. Is Britain doomed? Is our literature decadent? Are our workmen weary? Without statistics, photographic records, Gallup Poles, sociological reports, loud bangs, television serials, breakfast cereals, economic analyses and above all without cultural assessments and innumerable exhibitions of Vacuist paintings how is it possible for anyone to arrive at a correct conclusion except by suicide or a full-stop? Answer me that. It is not possible. On the contrary it is *impossible*. IMP, I say, OSSIBLE. Allow me to point out to those objectionable frols who attempt to state otherwise, whether incognito, out ofognito or in sign language, that they are sneaks! caterwauling blisters! ragwort poisoners! lickspittles! lead-swingers! dregs! snaggy-lips! blacklegs! boozers! wigs! withered cheese mites!

aspidistras! grogworms! tumpties! loppypdepters! louts! draggles! bilgescuppers! lampblackeners! gravysnatchers! grave polluters! ossipedes! frowstrated nosetwitching schizophrènes! sprains! droughts! draughts! groils! and let me assure the enemies of British resurgence that they now have Pootlewhite or whoever I am to contend with and had better look to their digestion if they don't want their tums to rumble, for the Springthorpe Cultural Mission will never bend the knee to despair nor bow beneath the yoke of a foreign egg. Three cheers for Stodge, our foremost Vacuist sculptor, whose forthright, nay fifthright and explosive masterpiece I now unveil. Rip the cloth off, boys!"

The pin-striped man had been rendered dunderheaded by Picklewit's astounding gallimaufry and proved incapable of movement; Stodge, who didn't care what people said, thought it unfitting that the sculptor should unveil his own statue, so the job was left to the Third Man, a bloke named Green-Greene, who looked like a dyspeptic undertaker, to pull the requisite cord. The drape dropped. There was a general gasp and a major hiss, not to mention a certain corporal moan. For, to put it plainly, something had happened to Stodge's masterpiece. Yerss. Four small boys had placed a ladder against it, one had climbed up the ladder and emptied a bottle of milk over the statue's head and when the drape dropped there they were crouched on their haunches still busy with their spoons; of the sculpture only a small mound remained on which the ladder lay helplessly sprawled. The boys tried half-hopelessly to rise but couldn't, being weighed down like kellyies by the lumps of porridge sogging sadly in their midst. Stodge uttered a low hoot, sprang to the nearest boy and seized him savagely by the ear. All spectators confidently expected him to howl: "O desecrator, you have ruined me masterpiece!" or "Vandals! Scamps! I'll have the Law on you!" or "Greedy little scoundrel, I'll wring your ear off and slosh you with a spirtle," but no. No. Oh no no no no no no no no no. No. He raised the other hand (the right hand), and dealt the urchin a resounding smack on the crumpet. "That'll teach you to eat porridge with

sugar instead of salt!" he roared. "I'll re-educate you, you young lout!"

Charlatan's eyes filled with tears. He staggered forward and embraced Stodge warmly and wetly. "O noble fellow!" he said. "O brave soul!"

"It's time you came along to eat the sandwiches the Mayor told me to offer you instead of a banquet," the pin-striped bloke said. "They're stale cheese sandwiches. Good thing the boys didn't leave much porridge. The market's well rid of that mess."

"I didn't care for the import of that remark," said Stodge. "Actually. If my ears don't deceive me, because although I'm not a severe fellow I like porridge and don't wish to hear it described as a mess, you're a boundrel, sir, a scoundrel. It seems to me, Picklewit, that this little pin-striped horror ought to be made to eat what's left of the divine substance."

"Oh!" cried Charlatan. "Dear me! Good gracious! Stodge! Really!"

"Good idea, old boy," said Picklewit. "Grab him, Brute!"

"Yumps! Not half!" Quintus bellowed, anxious to display his physical prowess before the eyes of the now astonishingly buxom Hilda. "Did you see the way the nasty tick stuck out his eyes at me? Stuff him full of the muck."

"It will be *good* for him, Charlatan," Stodge explained earnestly, cuffing a stray urchin and relieving the lad of his spoon. "He looks undernourished. Porridge builds the brain cells and soothes the savage breast."

"Police!" called Pinstripe. "Green-Greene, call the Fire-Brigade!"

But the dyspeptic undertaker, after standing motionless, speechless and gormless for an electrically-charged moment while Picklewit and Brute bore Pinstripe to the ground, began to cluck suddenly with cacophonous chuckles when he saw Stodge slowly and soberly, as one conducting a solemn rite, ladelling porridge into Pinstripe's flap-like mouth, all over his chin and down his waistcoat, and eventually reeled off gasping: "Oh dearie dearie dearie dearie scurf and dirty finger-nails what would Evelyn say if he saw this. Never in

all my plethora of days have I witnessed such a—such a—such a—hoo hoo hoo hoo ha hum hu hi ho ha hum hoo hoo hee hoo etc.”

Charlatan buried his face in his hands and burst into tears.

“Get that pantehnicon started, Snagg!” called Picklewit, “Make it snappy or we’ll stuff you with porridge, too. We’d better scapa before trouble flows.”

Throughout the speeches and suivant ructions Joe’s head had been buried in the engine. Now he extricated it long enough to say: “Opeless. Need another hour on this job,” and buried it again.

But when Picklewit shouted: “Quick! The cops!” he had the bonnet down in a trice, the engine started in another and the vast contrivance grumbling into motion in a third. The motor bikes of Picklewit and Charlatan roared away with Stodge perched on Picklewit’s pillion, spoon raised aloft like a flag. Pinstripe, surrounded by helpless little tubs of urchindise and completely smothered in porridge sat shaking both clotted fists in spasmodic rage.

CHAPTER SEVEN

For Softies

WE HAVE PUT this in especially for the benefit of intellectuals who, quite rightly, insist that a novel, even a disguised autobiographical excursus such as this, should have some significance. We are fully aware that many readers will raise their eyebrows at various incidents reported in this volume. (For instance, that absurd passage about Hilda's measurements.) It is natural for them, after such an experience, to conclude that the authors have no serious intentions in writing this chronicle, whereupon they will return with mouldy satisfaction to the works of Miss Compton Burnett (Ivy) or Mr. Toynbee (Philip).

We feel such accusations keenly and wish to negative* them before they gain further ground. We are alive to our responsibility in this matter, having perused with intense bespectacled zeal times without number a large corpus of pamphlets in stiff covers by Dr. A. Comfort on the *Artist and Social Responsibility*, *Social Responsibility and the Artist*, *Responsibility and Social Artistry*, *Society and Artistic Response*, *Art and Responsible Sociality*, and *The Poor House*.† We intend, therefore, to make our position only too clear. If you are *not* an intellectual (though goodness knows why you're reading this stultifying masterpiece if you're not) slip this chapter and

* A splendid word, we feel, inserted especially to please Mr. Ivor Brown.

† We have also read *Notes Towards a Possible Suggestion for an Approach in the Direction of a Tentative Definition of The Meaning of Culture*, by T. S. Eliot.

turn briskly to the next, which is a breezy account of Stodge, Hilda and Quintus Brute at the Football Match.

Now an intellectual likes nothing better than a quotation from some obscure author, so we lead off with Giraldus Cambrenis, who once played centre-half for Wales and was sent off the field for sitting (three times) on Carlyle's head.

"There is the case of the archbishop who began his sermon thus: *Audite et intelligite, vos omnes qui estis in isto sacro synodo*, and when one of his clerks whispered *a, a*, he was not impatient of correction, but added, *in ista sacra synoda*, and when the clerk still whispered, *o et a*, he repeated for the third time, *in isto sacro synoda*."

The humility of the archbishop appeals to us enormously, and we have to a certain extent modelled our *Weltanschauung* or whatever the word is on the reverend gentleman's. Like all cosy writers we belong to a club where we mingle with the great, and we never refuse the advice that is showered upon us. As we scribble, Graham comes by and murmurs, "Don't forget the sense of sin"—and you must already have noticed Charlatan's continual twingling and twanging of conscience. Charlatan is indeed hopelessly and helplessly exposed to the Agenbite of Inwit. Then Jean-Paul will hover about snarling "Man is alone"—and we faithfully report the absurdity of life with incidents such as the Taking of Hilda's Measurements. Peering over our shoulder Robert urges clarity of style, and adjures us (if that's the right word, and even if it isn't) to cut poetry out of our prose—the success of his admonition is apparent on every page. Evelyn warns us continually that everyone is detestable except a few Lords and members of Mum Church—and who among our characters is lovable? What a stew of lust (Brute), greed (Snagg), power-mania (Picklewit), laziness (Snagg), hypocrisy (Charlatan) and etcetera (everybody, even Bert Laggs) is thrown down on these pages. And Ernest raps out, "Fear turns men to animals." There will be enough fear in this book to turn the country into a menagerie, you can be sure of that.

All in all (and where else could it be, when you come to

think of it?) this picaresque, chimerical novelette is already assured of an humpruptious reception because it has been written with the help of every literary trickster in town. (We live in the country.) Even the Marquis figures in a horrible beating-up scene which we intend to pop in if we can remember.

So back to Giraldus, whom (?) we regard not as a model but as a source of fun. And that is why we give you the following, not because it has any bearing at all on our tale, but because fun is the one ingredient that our harrowing and etoning work has so far lacked.

"We will show" (writes Giraldus) "by sundry examples the manner in which parish priests today explain to their parishioners the gospels and holy scripture. There is the case of the priest who was preaching to the people a sermon about S. Barnabas, and he said among other things: 'He was a good man and a saint, but he used, however, to be a robber.' For his authority was that verse of the gospel, namely, 'Now Barabbas was a robber,' and he did not distinguish properly between Barnabas and Barabbas. Then there is the case of the priest who was preaching about the Canaanite woman, and he said she was partly a woman and partly a dog, because he did not distinguish between *Canaanite* and *canine*. Then that of the priest who was announcing the feast of SS. Simeon and Jude, and said that, 'The one was a good man and a saint, and the other the man who betrayed Christ, and we ought not to honour his day for his own sake, but for that of his companion,' confusing S. Jude with Judas."

There are a lot more, such as the priest who translated "broiled fish" so that it became "donkey fish," claiming that just as there were dog fish, so there were hare fish and fish corresponding to all the land animals, and this was donkey fish; and the one who gave the same translation to the numerals 500 and 50 in the parable of the two debtors, adding, "But in one case the coin were Angevin and in the other sterling."

That's quite enough pandering to intellectuals. We intend now to summarise the story thus far, like they do in women's

magazines, so that no one will complain that he does not understand its implications.

A wild rumour had been circulating the world that Great Britain was in decline. The Empire was breaking out in rash assertions, the English football team had been defeated again by the U.S.A., Wimbledon had become a misery for British spectators, Krushchev kept on bulganing, chimpanzees were invading the Coronation, the British Navy was getting smaller and smaller, and smaller and ditto, and Miss England was unplaced in the international Beauty Contest. The Government decided to act, failed to get into the cast of any reasonable play, so enlisted the support of Sir Arnold Springthorpe, Bart., and his coefficient organisation. Orders were to prove that Britain was *not*, repeat *not*, declining, and to perform this enormous feat (well large feet, anyway) by statistical, photographic, literary, artistic, filmic, televisionary, telepathic, pornographic, osteopathic, psychopathic, romantic, necromantic, expeditious, propagandic and utilitarian means, as quick as winkie. But because no one listens to you today unless you bog down in a morass of scientific terminology, the directive was to prove that Britain was *not*, repeat *not*, subject to entropy. This implied that although the rest of the world would undoubtedly be affected by the eventual cooling of the sun (i.e. to be as accurate as possible, would run down like a clockwork toy) this fate would *not*, repeat *not*, overtake Britain, which would be safeguarded from the normal course of things by that unalterable bulwark, THE BRITISH CHARACTER. While the Cominform, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Krupps would founder in the coming howdoyoudo, Lord's, Crufts and the English pub would not only survive but swell horribly.

It took Sir Arnold (owner of the keen brain which had raised the dividends on Springthorpe Beer from 3 per cent. to 33½ per cent. in two years)—it took him, we say, exactly 33½ seconds to make his decision: put Charlatan and Picklewit in charge of the project. (Charlatan and Picklewit, it may be stated in passing, had already proved themselves the kind of bounders required for the job in their campaign

of 1950 and 51 to sift English literature—i.e. to push the mush through the mesh—and had secretly been informed by practically every living writer and a good many dead ones that what they had said about every other living writer and a good many dead ones was perfectly justified. They were also, of course, the brains behind the Vacuist movement, or the school of vacancy in painting.)

This combination of vision (Charlatan) and business acumen (Picklewit) seemed ideally suited to tackle the task. Picklewit realised that statistical proof was important (chiefly for reference purposes) but that the top priority, the thing that would sweep the world into sincere and grudging admiration of British resilience, was a concrete symbol. And in Hilda Hourí they had just the symbol they required. If Hilda could be built up from a wisp into a strapping creature of fourteen or fifteen stone, what other signs would the average man, woman and neuter need? Hilda Hourí was their trump card.

The project immediately gained the support of all men of generous goodwill and feeble intellect. We have shown, for instance, how the Gallup Pole and the porridge sculptor Stodge immediately threw in their lot (and their porridge as well) with the anti-entropic campaigners. Others will follow.

It must not be thought, however, that the Mission was to accomplish its aim without a struggle. All those who regarded British predominance as a menace to their own ends—Edmund Wilson, for instance—were immediately in arms against it. Chief of these was that sordid gang of unprincipled middle-eastern adventurers, Handonose, who lost no time in sticking their hands and noses into these pages. Cunning as they were, they realised promptly that Britain could most effectively be wounded in the person of Hilda Hourí.

Now read on.*

* Readers interested in experimental writing are advised to turn to page 136 where they will find an excellent example of this *genre*.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*In which riff-raff engage in
Third Division stuff*

THE DAY AFTER the contretemps at Mottleton a newspaper headline informed the public: MAYOR'S SECRETARY MAULED—CULTURE CORPS STUFFS MOTTLETON MAN WITH PORRIDGE.

A leading article asked: "Is this British Culture?" A good deal of unsavoury material about the respective but not respectable pasts of Picklewit and Charlatan was raked up. "Surely," a scribbler scribbled, "there has been no more outrageous insult to the people of this country since the so-called webbing modeller, Jonathan Dean, draped his disgusting monstrosities on Buckingham Palace? And who were Dean's co-hoaxers in the Vacuist movement? Picklewit, Charlatan and Stodge. How is it that Sir Arnold Springthorpe was allowed to entrust such men with public money?" Etc. etc. and considerable tracts of so forth.* Worrying, eh? Disconcerting? Not half. You can imagine the conversation when Picklewit rang Sir Arnold and found him back from Paris. You can't? Oh, all right, then.

"Hello? Sir Arnold Springthorpe speaking."

"What? Is that Charlatan?"

"No. Is that Picklewit?"

"No. Look here, who is speaking, please?"

"Picklewit."

"Well, why didn't you—Now look here, we want no more

* Hickey even forgot to lick royal toe-toes for a half-column.

jokes, Picklewit. Do you realise that there will be questions asked in the House about this Mottleton mess?"

"Yes, and one or two asked in the Garden too, I shouldn't wonder. All that porridge wasted! And I do congratulate you, Sir Arnold, on your poetic acumen. The Mottleton Mess is a splendidly apt description of that pin-striped poltroon."

"I wouldn't like to think I had made a mistake in engaging you and Charlatan to conduct this investigation, Picklewit. Responsible people could easily be found to replace you."

"Where's our money?"

"Money? Can you honestly say that you have deserved money? Did you read the *Daily Lapse* this morning? If I gave you any more money there would be a national outcry."

"More? We haven't had any! I warn you, if we don't get some money the Mayor of Wimplestead had better look to his moustache. Besides, Stodge and Sczx the Gallup Pole are now on the pay-roll."

"What? This won't do, Picklewit. I forbid it. I want a detailed report of all your activities as soon as possible."

"There's no such word as 'possible' in my vocabulary, Sir Arnold."

A short grumfabulation broke out at the other end of the wire and then was stilled abruptly. "This is my last warning, Picklewit. Either—or else—" Sir Arnold rang off.

When Picklewit returned to the lounge of the Maudlin Hotel Brute and Hilda were poring and giggling at the table.

"Really!" Charlatan said. "The way you two carry on anyone would think we had cause to be proud of the manner in which you behaved at Mottleton. Picklewit, it's monstrous, they are making a Press-cutting book!"

"Splendid idea," Picklewit said.

Stodge was seated like a small captive balloon in an arm-chair beside the fire, slowly twiddling his thumbs. Joe Snagg was underneath the pantechicon in the garage. No one knew where Tripod was. The Gallup Pole was prowling abroad looking for spies, quislings and evil spirits.

"Action!" said Picklewit. "Action!"

"If you ask me," said Brute, "we've had enough action for

awhile; during the daytime at any rate, in my view, not enough at night, eh, Hilda?"

Hilda bridled, shied, giggled and bridled once more.

"*Right* action, please," said Charlatan. "The Chinese philosophers are agreed that action must be right action, and that if action is not right action, inaction is better—wandering, you know, in the non-self."

"Well, Brute," said Picklewit curtly, "what statistics have you got?"

"I took Hilda's measurements," Quintus assured him, "and she's increasing in girth and boundaries in a mad, delicious way, aren't you, my luscious steak?"

"Stick to the point," Picklewit said. "Charlatan and I can deal with Hilda's measurements. What we want is a statistical report on the morale of the people. Go to a football match and count heads or something. Then count hats and correlate the two figures."

"A football match!" cried Brute. "There are no figures at football matches—women don't go!"

"Well, they will this afternoon," said Picklewit. "You go with Quintus, Hilda."

"Oh!" carolled Hilda. "But will it be safe? I mean, that note, those People, that Threat! Oughtn't Mr. Sneeze, our bodyguard, to be there to see that all is well?"

"Subtraction and detraction!" swore Brute. "We're having no Poles on *our* perch. Come along, Hilda, we're off before the fellow gets back from wherever he's been boozing."

Stodge floated to his feet. "If you don't mind," he said, "I think perhaps I'll toddle along with you—a football match in porridge you know might strike an interesting flabby sort of a note as it were, and somehow I'm feeling in need of a kind of inspirational something, if you know what I mean, if it comes to that."

"Thank goodness," said Picklewit, when they had gone. "Now I can go to bed."

And despite Charlatan's protests, he went.

Charlatan, conscience gnawing at his entrails, seated himself at the mahogany-substitute desk and on the hotel's puce

notepaper began to inscribe a circumambient and euphemistic report to Sir Arnold Springthorpe, M.A., C.B.E., F.R.S., W.D., P.S., M.P.B., G.P.O., D.D.T. "We seek to widen the scope of our activities daily," he wrote. "Statistical calculus proceeds apace . . . photographic masterpieces abound in Walsall . . . industrial investigations . . . possible avenues explored . . . no stone left upturned . . . such and such . . . so on . . . blah blah . . . blethers . . . so forth . . . etcetera . . . froth . . . blither . . . balderdash . . . newps . . . porps . . ."

"Mr. Charlatan?" said a voice.

Behind the voice stood a gangrenous looking young drip with patent-leather hair and a shabby hat held in a shaking shocking hand. "I'm from the *Global News*. I'd like a few straight facts on this culture business for our readers. What is culture, Mr. Charlatan, when it comes down to it?"

"What a nice young fellow," reflected Charlatan. "Anxious to educate himself when opportunity offers. How churlish it would be to disoblige him, whatever Picklewit, the uncouth monster, may say."

"Sit down, my dear chap," Charlatan jovially crowed. "Culture is, as you know, the expression of a people's highest aspirations. Now the aspiration of the British people, as Sir Arnold Springthorpe has often said, is blah blah . . . blethers; blithering nonsense: porps, newps. Froth. Blither."

"Is it true three of your gang have just sloped off to a football match, Mr. Charlatan?"

"A football match! Er—certainly not! What an idea! Our team is working at full pressure on documents, reports, calculations, memoranda, memorabilia, and this that and the blither."

"I'd very much like to see one of these mummerybilious, Mr. Charlatan. Most revealing, illuminating and destructive, I'll be bound."

"Yes you will be bound, you young bounder, and gagged too, if you don't clear off quick," came Picklewit's ugly tones from the doorway. "Go on, beat it, we know you, you're from the anti-cultural Press, we'll conduct our own publicity, thank you. No statement."

The reporter rose. "You're the chap who was nearly put inside for selling all Major Bilborough's books when pretending to be his secretary, aren't you?"

"My name's Trumgasketer," replied Picklewit, "and you're the chap who'll be put outside on his ear if he doesn't wave his flippers and flop off. If you want any more information ring Sir Arnold Springthorpe, he's got time to waste."

"Come come, Mr. Picklewit, this won't do, you know," the reporter said. "It's unwise to antagonise the Press."

Said Picklewit :

"To antagonise
Is none too wise,
To kick in the pants is foolish;
But Picklewick
Just loves to kick,
And he's got a kick that's mulish."

"My paper never did like the British Council, the Arts whatdoyoucallem and all that," said the reporter, bristling. "I've a good mind to call you—an *anarchist*!" He hissed the last word like a cobra at a music hall.

"Good," said Picklewit.

The moustached representative of the power of the printed word stalked from the room like a dahlia.

"Picklewit," said Charlatan sternly. "You have gone too far. You have ruined everything. What will Sir Arnold say now! We are destroyed!"

"Nonsense," said Picklewit. "As I've said before, we're to prove the non-entropification of Britain and the place is obviously moribund, so we must liven it up. Stuffing Mayor's secretaries with porridge and getting called anarchists in the Press is a splendid way of achieving this. I shall explain that to Sir Arnold. . . . The trouble with you, Charlatan, is that you haven't yet realised how deeply and earnestly the British public hates culture."

"Hates culture!" hoobled Charlatan. "How can a people hate its highest aspirations, Picklewit!"

"Easy," Picklewit replied, "by hating them, thus: Hate."

"But Pickle, you talk as if we were racketeers rather than idealists, as if we were—well—working in some dubious cause, and, after all——"

"Quite," said Picklewit, and returned to bed.

Charlatan groaned and pushed aside his report. What, he reasonably asked, is the use?

The football match into the spectating crowd at which (a splendid construction, you will agree, resembling in its verbal manner Stanley Matthews' dribbling wizardries and Jonathan Dean's webbing wallabies) Brute and Stodge thrust their way, was fought out between Elizabethans United and Romantic Wanderers. The mob pullulated and gloriously booed Marlowe, the Elizabethan centre-forward, from the moment our friends arrived. Marlowe, you see, had scored a goal, but Wordsworth, the Romantics' burly full-back, claimed a foul; a large section of the crowd claimed one too and only the referee—a fellow named Langland—among the whole cacophonous and repellent mob, seemed undisturbed.*

"Batter him! Gollop him! Biff the ref! Bash Marlowe! Bump him! Belabour him! Destroy the lot of em! Oh, quoi, quelle gaffe! Etcetera!" hooped the hurly-gush. "Balden him! Integrate his personality! Megalomania! Centipede! And so on!" trumpeted the holocaust.

"I say, don't you think, considering everything," said Stodge to Brute, "that we ought to take to our heels?"

But Quintus, clutching Hilda in a protective embrace, hooted joyfully: "Tear up his square roots! Rip away the number you first thought of! Yumfould!"

Stodge escaped the snapping teeth of a Romantic stalwart by the skim of his milk.

The game recommenced as games will and before a Chinese architect could have snarled "Herbert Rittenbullet," P. B. Shelley on the Romantics' left wing had his shorts destroyed by a hefty bounder named Drayton. Uproar! Hullabaloo! Allez-ooop! Knees up Mother Brown! Upsadaisy! Booms a dandelion! Hackney Wick! Well, naturally.

The Elizabethans, there's no doubt about it, were playing

* Quipped *Daily Express* reporter—but no, it's too weak to quote.

a robust, attacking, dirty game. No stopper centre-half nonsense with them—bash, crash, wallop, cantrap, scollop, cavortle, the ball booted and basted from hither to thither in a thunderous trice. As far as one could judge their tactics were simple—they all pursued the ball wherever it went and the first to reach it whanged it at the enemy goal. If any opponent got near the ball they bandersnatched him. Pity about Keats, but it's all in the game, we mean.

Q. Brute had his notebook out and was counting the number of unprintable words used by the more individually audible members of the crowd. He had reached 20,005 when Hilda fainted away. Quintus turned just in time to see her being dragged off among the milling mass by a tall dark lozenge with a phenomenal konk.

"Stodge!" he yelled. "Up porridge! To the rescue!" He plunged into the thick of the throng, and then plunged out again, expelled by a gaggle of heated bawlers. Where was Hilda? Where was she? Who could tell?

"Hilda!" bellowed Brute, but no shricket of a feminine reply could be heard above the surging din. A difficult situation, we think you'll agree, and even if you don't it *was* a difficult situation, facts are facts, we don't need a majority decision about them. But Stodge and Brute were not to be defeated so easily, Stodge and Brute weren't. If they couldn't move, neither could Hilda's kidnapper. They were all wedged in the horrid welter.

"Elizabethans!" thundered Brute. "The Romantics have kidnapped the symbol of rugged football, that glorious apex of womanhood, that goddess of the chase, Hilda Houri! At them! Rescue her! There they go!"

For at that moment the dark monster, unable to escape from the crush in any other way, dived on to the field, Hilda's inert form slung across his shoulders. He couldn't run, either, for Hilda was now a strapping lass and his skinny legs trembled something shocking. At that very moment—this phrase, together with the word "suddenly" is a grand stand-by for we boys' writers, and we shall employ it mercilessly—the ball, thumped by the boot of a chap named Kyd on the

Elizabethan left-wing, caught the horrid fellow in the chest—down came fellow and Hilda and all.

Q. Brute jumped on to the field of play. Believing him to be in hot pursuit of the referee the mob naturally followed. Need we say more? Well, pandemonium, then. For instance, above the hurly-burly like a flock of birds sailed hats, shoes, socks, hands, heads, arms, oaths, ejaculations (such as Yaroo! Yowl! Gerroff! Leggo! and Ooop!), umblepumpfesters and, of course, Stodge, dreaming all the time of porridge statues. Brute, minus tie, left trouser-leg, right shoe and sangfroid, emerged dragging Hilda by the feet, thus exposing a good deal of splendidly developed leg and—well, so forth. Brute forgot his woes, abandoned Stodge and staggered toward freedom, bearing the blushing Hilda like a bride.

What of the brown kidnapper? Who knows? And what of Stodge? He wandered off home having quite forgotten the afternoon's events.

But the Press on the following morning blazoned upon its bosom an account of the goings-on of the Springthorpe Cultural Mission: How Brute the statistician and Stodge the sculptor pursued a terrified girl on to a football field and when the referee tried to interfere they assaulted him and a pitched battle ensued.

Charlatan and Picklewit Again— Culture Thugs Cosh Ref. Outrage in the Midlands.

The Global News, of course, ran a long and bitter editorial containing such phrases as: These Men Are Dangerous... a marriage of Art and the Underworld... How long will the British public endure etc. Splendid stuff altogether, as Picklewit remarked, absolutely splendid stuff.

CHAPTER NINE

*In which two English gentlemen receive a letter
from the Orkney Bloody Isles*

Orkney Bloody Isles
Nr. Ultima Thule
Wet Sunday

Oh, Mr. Picklewit and Mr. Charlatan, Sirs,

Whatever will you be thinking of me? No doubt you regard me as a renegade and a traitor to the cause. But please do not be hasty, allow me to outline to you the tragic events which have brought me to this humiliating condition, to reveal to you the manner in which the fiends once more machinated my downfall. As you will see from the above address (I blush as I read it, but it is a measure of my condition, Mr. Picklewit and Mr. Charlatan, Sirs, that I, a man of sober habits and convinced devotion to family life, past whose lips such expressions rarely pass and then only during festivals when a certain degree of latitude is allowed and even encouraged, that I should have been reduced to such a state makes my heart bleed and causes me to beat my head against the wall with which fate's diabolic minions have surrounded me.) And not least painful is the thought of my dear wife and the children, those who have learned to call me Da and have ever regarded me as the rock on which their lives can be built, this in itself is almost unbearable and makes fair to drive me out of my wits.

Dear Mr. Charlatan and Mr. Picklewit, you will doubtless stand amazed at the incoherence of this communication, but believe me, I have endured more than it is the lot of most men to endure, and it is a Marvel to me that I remain sane—if indeed the small store of wits remaining to me can be regarded in even the most favourable light as evidence of sanity. But I have determined all along to retain my native courage and to stand out against the persecution of Fools, Hyenas and Imbeciles. With your help, my dear friends (if I may presume to designate you such) I will yet bring my enemies to their knees.

Suffice it to say that, when on a certain fateful day I fled from your company I was not entirely clear where I should go—deeming it best, in fact, to remain vague for reasons of Policy. Although I was convinced that you have mentioned Lancaster as an eminently suitable place in which to make photographic records of lasting beauty, and therefore decided to avoid it as one would avoid the measles, I found in my outer pocket a little sketch map with HEREFORD written in large letters (doubtless put in along with my sandwiches by your secretary, Miss Houri. Incidentally, will you please inform her that the sandwiches were *anchovy* and not *salmon* as requested. I hope this mistake will not occur again—if for me there is to be a future which contains either *salmon* or *anchovy*, which sometimes, bending and reeling; as I am beneath the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, I beg leave to doubt. But this is a digression, and I trust that you will pardon it, attributing it to the vagaries of a bewildered *Mind*—and with good reason, as you will hear in due course.)

I changed into another train which the Guard informed me went in the opposite direction to Hereford, and was settling down to examine my plates and negatives when I saw a slip of paper appear beneath the door of the compartment! Imagine my consternation! For five minutes I considered my position (I never act without first taking thought and, as Sir Arnold himself would be eager to inform you, when I have made my decision I act boldly), whereupon I concluded it

best to examine the slip of paper. My distress upon reading it was profound. A poem met my eyes :

Speed, friend Tripod, double quick—
England echoes with alarm !
To the northern port of Wick
Haste thee, gallant ! Maa es salaam.

Beneath this was a curious little drawing of a thumb pointing to a nose, with the fingers extended. Horrible ! Horrible ! My first reaction was one of healthy and critical scepticism, soon, alas, to be replaced by the senseless conviction that this message came from no other than your good selves ! Oh, Mr. Picklewit and Mr. Charlatan, Sirs, how you must despise me ! But consider for one moment the situation in which I found myself—the dangerous nature of my mission, my awareness that I was one of a small band of adventurers who had devoted themselves to the m——n of B——n (note how, even in my present state of nerve-wracked debility I still take even the most elaborate precautions), the fact that I was confused in mind owing to my Fiend-Avoidance policy of Always Doing the Opposite (a policy which often makes it very difficult to know which is the opposite and which is the posit)—how naturally, therefore, knowing your own original methods and the envelope of mystery in which you necessarily wrap even the most trivial action, that I should assume this message came from you, believing that your subtlety was so great that you had clothed yourselves in the very guise of the demonic agencies themselves in order to confuse them and the issue inextricably, thus leaving me free to act for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Blame me, Sirs, expose me, dock my pay, denounce me in a secret document which will damn my naivety before posterity, but do not, I pray you, if only for the sake of my patient wife and the little ones, do not lose all faith in me.

Acting according to my supposed instructions (O foul and fatal trap !) I made my way to Wick and was there met by two very charming gentlemen dressed in the uniform of the

Royal Air Force, an organisation for which I have the highest possible regard. It occurred to me at the time that they were comparatively dark skinned, but there are so many dark-skinned gentlemen in the country these days that I feel I may be excused for suspecting nothing sinister in their appearance. They said their names were Milner and Bell, and I remember now that Mr. Bell said something about having had a holiday at Bournemouth where (I am told) there is perpetual sunshine. All I can remember about these two gentlemen (although I now know them to have been Fiends in *disguise* they behaved with perfect propriety throughout) is that Mr. Milner smiled continually, and Mr. Bell had a very soft heart which caused him to break into sobs at the most unexpected moments—a reference to *oil* induced waterfalls—while Mr. Milner's very large hand (he squeezed mine playfully and it was all I could do to stop myself crying out) and Mr. Bell's truly monstrous nose were distinguishing features. But in themselves these things, mere physical accidents, cannot be held against them.

They took me to a public house and (you must believe me, Mr. Picklewit and Mr. Charlatan, Sirs) gave me *one* drink. I was rather embarrassed as I felt it the part of a gentleman to repay in kind, but owing to the unfortunate delay in payment of our salaries (understand me, good Sirs, I am not complaining of this, although I do trust that this delay has been already *rectified*) I was unable to do so. (I could only travel so far as I did by hiding in the lavatory whenever the ticket collector came round.) But one drink is all I had—I *always* know when I have had enough.

To be perfectly fair, I must add that these two gentlemen showed considerable concern about my night's lodgings. Both Mr. Milner and Mr. Bell were extremely merry on the way home and sang songs in a language I could not pretend to understand, although they stated that it was a kind of R.A.F. slang peculiar to *overseas stations*. As soon as I arrived I felt a most unusual sense of drowsiness creep over me—the last thing I remember was Mr. Milner and Mr. Bell standing beside me smiling and enquiring

whether I was not nearly *out*. I replied "Out? No, Sir, never. I shall bat through to the end."

I knew no more until the morning, when I discovered the full horror of my situation. How many days have elapsed, Mr. Charlatan and Mr. Picklewit, Sirs, since that fateful evening in Wick I cannot imagine. Time, the riddle of philosophers and the enemy of youth, has me in thrall! Suffice it to say, then, that I awoke in a long hut with numerous other men, stretching in endless rows in *every* direction, and was told that I was in the R.A.F.!

And now my pen fails me. Despite all my protests, I am informed that I am a photographic observer in the Royal Air Force and must prepare to fly to Kenya *tomorrow* to take pictures of Mau Mau! a gentleman of whom I have never heard! It is in vain that I explain who I am, claim that a monstrous mistake has been made, demand an enquiry and full compensation—I meet only with the blank but not dumb wall of insolence and indifference. I have been shouted at, *forced* to peel potatoes, and given a bed next to the door where the draught has revived my lumbago, from which all my family are hereditary sufferers, and which kept me out of the I Zingari team for the whole 1924 season. And, to crown all, my shooting-stick has been taken from me. Owing to a slight defect in my feet, bestowed on me at birth by God's wondrous whim, I am unable to proceed without my shooting-stick except to the accompaniment of extremely painful pediatric sensations.

That is my story. Incredible as it may seem, it is true in every particular. I now throw myself on your mercy, relying absolutely on your good offices, confident that you will pluck justice from this hotbed of intrigue. My mind is still a chaos, the images of my loved ones are constantly between my eyes and the paper on which I write. For myself, although Mr. Milner and Mr. Bell are obviously essential parts of this hideous mechanism, I am not fully convinced of their conscious complicity. As I have already said, they treated me with the utmost courtesy. I seem to detect in this affair a Hidden Hand—for, as you know, I have a Nose for conspiracy.

Bless you, Sirs, may the Lord shower upon you those blessings He has denied to me—and may He also be a willing accomplice in your efforts to extricate me from this uninvited *purgatory*.

Yours sincerely,

Dennis Tripod.

P.S.—Please don't forget the shooting-stick.

"Shocking mixed metaphors," Picklewit said. "Very confused thinking. The fellow's a boob." He put down the letter and picked up the telephone. "Get me the Air Ministry," he rapped.

Charlatan clasped and unclasped his hands nervously, thus: clasp, unclasp, clasp, unclasp (nervously). "The least we can do is send the poor fellow some candy and a few throat lozenges," he said. "How horrifying it all is!"

"Air Ministry?" said Picklewit. "Bomber Harris? Eh? Damn the Conference. Give me Clutterbowl, then. . . . Of course he will. Jump lively. Tell him Sir Bevan Wintlee wants him." He sat drumming with his knuckles on the table, thus: rat, tat, tittitoetee, ta, tittletumteetietotee, rat, tit, tat, to, tum, ta, tittletie, tum. "Need some changes high up," he said to Charlatan.

"Oh, that you, Clutterbowl? Wintlee here. Look, some of your goons have waylaid one of my men and shanghaied him to the Orkneys. It won't do, you know, Clutterbowl. If we're not going to work together we can't expect the country to survive the cold war, can we? I want the fellow back. No, not tomorrow. Today. And Clutterbowl! Cashier the chap in charge. Look into it thoroughly. There's something very fishy about the whole affair. . . . What's that? I don't care whose nephew he is, sack him."

He replaced the receiver and lifted the novel he was reading. Charlatan gazed at him in awe, admiration and wonderment. How many people knew the part Picklewit had played in the General Strike? How many people who cheered Baden-Powell on Mafeking Night knew the real truth about that siege and the man who had made the relief of

the town possible? And what would the public say if they were told how much Disraeli owed to Picklewit's calm assurance over the Suez Canal business? But Picklewit would never tell. His motto had always been : Something or other. Or is this Charlatan's imagination running away with him again, do you think? Who knows? Who can say? Who cares?

CHAPTER TEN

*In which a fine old English gentleman
spells Sausage*

THIS BRIEF CHAPTER is in the nature of an experiment, an avant garde tour de force, if we might venture to call it so, bringing you up to date as it were by means of a telephone conversation, a mutter of implication, ambiguity, innuendo and out u endo too if necessary, with no action, passion or any nonsense of that sort. Scene: Telephone kiosk, Marples' Hotel, Trickling, Notts.

Picklewit (in extenso): "Is that Sir Arnold Springthorpe?"
"Who?"

"Sir Arnold Springthorpe. S for sausage, P for pàrsley . . ."

"S for what?"

"Sausage!"

"Spell it."

"S for seaweed, a for addle, u for umblepumpfester, s for—
er—sausage . . ."

"S for *what* did you say?"

"Sausage. SAUSAGE!"

"Your name's Sausage?"

"My name's Picklewit. PICKLEWIT!"

"Good heavens! Picklewit! How dare you! It's simply immoral that you should have the impertinence to tax my ears with your traitorous voice. I'll have you cashiered—or at least I would if I had any cash—and drummed out of your clubs. This is criminal, scandalous, libellous, disreputable, atrocious, villainous, odious, contemptible, vile, pernicious.

The papers are full of ghastly outrages. Sir Baldron Withers is fuming, and intends to denounce me in the House. What's more, Sniggerley Bevels is going to denounce me down among the hollyhocks. I'll have you pickled, I warn you, Jailwit. . . ."

"I don't understand these asseverations, Sir Arnold. We thought we were following out your instructions to the letter, so we did. We imagined that you were eager for publicity. Well, Sir Arnold, you're getting it, I mean to say after all. Besides, aren't we proving that Britain isn't on the downgrade, Sir Arnold? Any nation capable of getting so excited and upset about a few jokes must be cheery and full of life, eh? We mean to flood the Press with statements, denials, statistics, refutations, repudiations, explanations and paterfamilias at any moment now."

"No ! Do you hear? No. N—O. NO. Nonono. Any statement to the Press I will make myself, personally. I have decided to dispense with your services. You are sacked."

"I can't quite hear you, Sir Arnold, there's a defect in the telephonic apparatus, I do declare."

"Sacked. SACKED."

"Spell it."

"S for sausages—No, damn it, you're driving me mad, I *hate* sausages, I——"

"If you have already eaten the sausages, as you say, Sir Arnold, we will make no further mention of the subject, though I do think it reprehensible that food intended for the Cultural Mission should be consumed in the administrative offices. However, let it pass. There is no need to excite yourself either about this other little matter. All is well, I am not, as you seem to fear, contemplating resignation——"

"You're sacked, I say, fired, expelled, rusticated !"

"Oh, surely not. I mean, if I'm to be dismissed, then Charlatan will at once go to the *Globe* office and sign statements to the effect that you hired us both as publicity agents to go round the country doing vulgar stunts to get your name in the papers. Bad show. Shocking, I should say. In fact, I feel a bit indignant really and have half a mind to hand in my resignation after all."

"No. This is blackmail."

"Whitemail, Sir Arnold, please."

"You can't threaten me, Picklewit. No one would take your word against mine."

"I should hope not. The very idea. However, if I'm sacked the game's up for Charlatan, Brute, Tripod, Snagg and Hilda. They'll all give evidence. Well, I mean, naturally. And as I was saying, I only rang up to ask for a little money—M for marzipan, O for ostrich——"

"How much?"

"A hundred pounds."

"Fifty."

"Done. Post Office, Tickling, Notts. And don't forget to send those sausages you owe us. Five pounds of Harrises by the first post. Very important. Good-bye, Sir Arnold."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*In which two English gentlemen
board the Wasserschloss*

UPON THE RETURN of the luckless Tripod the whole team found itself in a village five miles from Norwich. A nationwide campaign was now being waged against their project. Who could say whether the Press was in some manner the dupe of powerful Handonose agents? Who, indeed?

The whole team was living under canvas. Picklewit had never revealed the arrival of the fifty pounds and pretended that there wasn't enough money for them to live in a hotel. He had not confessed either that a large parcel of sausages had been left by him with the Post Master at Tickling with instructions to forward it to Captain Ewart Glupp, 14 Messerschmitt Strasse, Glospersburg, France. Spirits were at a low ebb, for it was unseasonably cold, for April; just to annoy them snow had chosen to fall, and lay thin upon the ground; if their tents had had pipes the water in them would have been frozen. Fortunately they had no pipes. The only person—if such he can be called—who remained cheerful was Brute, who spent hours at a time in Hilda's tent. Charlatan disapproved and wanted to read long passages from the Old Testament to the assembled gallimaufry but Picklewit restrained him, being convinced that Brute was in some mysterious, psycho-physiological manner, responsible for Hilda's amazing development. Be that as it may—and of course it will be, we mean, inevitably speaking under the circumstances—the camp rang with Brute's cheerful and

regrettable songs, while snowballs pounded against tents, cameras, pantehnicon and Tripod's shooting-stick day in day out.

"The snow it snoweth every day,"
sang Brute,
"But one pound to a guilder
April will give way to May
And cuckoos will greet Hilda."

Hilda lay on her groundsheet, wriggling her toes with pleasure, and tenderly feeling the bruise on her thigh where Quin had last pinched her. A glorious slab of womanhood she was, more like a baby elephant than a paid-up member of NUNO. But fear gripped her as she heard another voice, harsh and menacing, booming from over the marshes like a bittern :

"Disaster comes to those who wait.
To us the thought is balm.
Miss Houri will disintegrate !
Pop pop ! And maa es salaam."

It was unnerving, this constant awareness of danger. Hilda could not understand why all this venom should be directed against *her*.

Brute shared a tent with Tripod, who had been strangely silent since his return from the Orkneys. He rarely spoke except to mutter : "They seemed such nice men" or "You just can't tell with people." He spent a great deal of time in the pantehnicon developing pictures, most of which came out upside down. He confided to Picklewit that he had lost his skill since his terrible experience. Picklewit didn't worry; things usually come right side up in the end if you don't care which way up they come, he said. He was feeling pretty jovial as a matter of fact, for it's nice to have your name in the papers, and it was a long time since he had handled fifty pounds.

Even if Tripod had wanted to speak he couldn't because Brute never stopped. He regarded the whole expedition as

no end of a lark and never tired of recounting his amorous successes. For him the sole object of the adventure was the seduction of, preferably, girls, but he wasn't very particular. All his statistics now related to women and the size of beds.

Very different was the atmosphere in the next tent, shared by the Gallup Pole and Stodge. The Pole brooded endlessly on his country's martyrdom. Every time he saw Charlatan and Picklewit he galloped up to them, seized them by the hand, arm, lapel or nose and offered them undying devotion.

"I'm always ready to lend a hand," he said.

"Please," said Charlatan, flimsily. The very word "hand" made him palpitate passionately.

Matters were not improved by Brute marching out of his tent at that moment, buckling on a leather belt and proclaiming (presumably for the benefit of Tripod) "Yes, I've got a nose for women."

Charlatan went green and retired to his tent like Achilles.

In fact Brute annoyed everyone (except Hilda) when he strolled up and down singing "Time on my hands, And drops on my nose" at the top of his voice.

But let us return to the Pole. He went for long training canters all over the countryside, frightening farm-workers and their girl-friends out of their wits as he charged silently past in the gathering dusk. He talked nostalgically to Stodge about such gentlemen as Kosciusko, Paderewski and his brother, the gauze-painter Scz. Stodge didn't mind a bit, he just sat plumply meditating on such matters as: Do I understand what I'm thinking about? Is dogmatism rheumatism in dogs? What is an elastic pivot? Ought we to arrange for the repatriation of the Sun? How would it be possible to parody Time in porridge? Could porridge be made from Titus Oates? He paid no attention whatever to sarcastic voices calling in the stilly night :

"He came to live near Norwich
To make a lucky charm
From disgusting scraps of porridge
But it's futile. Maa es salaam."

Lastly, Snagg, for there must be a snag somewhere. He slept inside the pantehnicon, squashed between the range-finder and the geiger-counter. He was the most comfortable of the bunch, naturally. He located beer with the range-finder and placed it conveniently beside him on the counter. But you wouldn't have thought him comfortable if you had heard him grumphing, grampusing, grouching, grizzling, grumbling, girning and gargling about his woes. He never stopped worrying Picklewit and Charlatan. One day his gasket would be blown, the next his plugs oiled up and so on and so forth. It was impossible to know whether he was referring to himself or the pantehnicon. For instance, when Picklewit did manage to find him a new gasket he gave a nasty chuckle and said. "I only meant I was getting short of breath."

"It wouldn't worry me if you ran out of it altogether," snapped Picklewit. "Next time you want a spare part for the pantehnicon use your liver."

Joe sulked for the rest of the day.

This life continued for weeks on end. Charlatan and Picklewit tacked about the field cudgelling their brains to determine What To Do Next. It was not unusual on these occasions for an aeroplane to roar over and depict a hand to nose emblem on the blue sky. Once thousands of weeny parachutes wambled down, dangling teeny cardboard hands-onoses. The pioneers had by now learnt not to recoil from these manifestations, but still they did feel a bit depressed and frustrated.

One day Picklewit let out a whoop, thus: whoop, and shook the local paper like a flag. "Dean is here!" he cried.

Charlatan read a snippet at the bottom of page three. Jonathan Dean, the artist in webbing, great exponent of Vacuism and author of "All About Oilism" was living on a houseboat on one of the nearby Broads. (Brute's jokes about these we do not intend to repeat.)

"Dean," murmured Charlatan, and tears came to his nose. His eyes swam about in a red mist for a moment or two and through this latter he dimly discerned as in a dream the outlines of vast webbing constructs. For the benefit of those

readers who are not au fait with the avant garde in Les Mouvements Chiques d'Art, a few words about Dean will not, we trust, come amiss. Some years earlier Gilbert Ponce the critical journalist and Picklewit had put their heads together, thus: cronk, and decided they could Make Something of Dean's sculptures in webbing. All that was needed was a Group. They had enlisted the aid of that sterling fish propagandist Sturgeon MacReady and with the idealistic aid of Charlatan and the solid artistic work of Jonathan Dean and Stodge had created Vacuism, a new art movement which at one blow destroyed the significance of all earlier art movements and established a completely new attitude to visual reality. All, they declared, is Nothing, therefore to depict Reality it is only necessary to depict Nothing. Several well-known painters (Pieter van Pigge, Scx, Crankum, Sir Oblong Circle) jumped on the band wagon and exhibited frames surrounding air. Dean constructed Nil and Nought and O out of webbing, Stodge created What, Where, Why in porridge. It was realised at the time that Dean's theories and practice contained the seeds of national regeneration, but they had been opposed not only by academic critics but by outraged scoundrels whose own art movements had been knocked on the head by the brilliant new school. Eventually Dean had been imprisoned for draping webbing all over Buckingham Palace and the movement had come to a stop. Hence the excitement of Charlatan and Picklewit at finding him free once more.

Picklewit lifted his megaphone. "In five minutes we break camp and move to Hickling Broad," he announced.

"Lead me to her," yelled Brute, his eyes gleaming craftily.

"Come on, Snagg," Picklewit said. "That pantechnicon has to be on the road in three minutes."

"I'm not moving," Snagg replied sulkily. "It's Sunday."

"Sunday has been abolished," Picklewit shouted. "It's a symbol of entropy."

Despite Snagg's attempt to hold them up by driving into a ditch they reached Hickling in the afternoon. They gazed silently over the silent water, emotion gripping their hearts.

There, far out on the black plate of wetness they could see the houseboat, with a hull of wood and a webbing superstructure. Even Picklewit relaxed sufficiently to say: "When I see webbing I know the heart of old England still beats sound."

The only person who appeared disappointed was Brute.

"Can't see no broads," he kept saying. He plunged desperately knee-deep into a chaos of bullrushes and birdweed, his keen nose twitching like a setter's.

But although they shouted and hallooed for half an hour there was no reply from the houseboat and no sign of life thereon.

"He's below deck working on something," Picklewit said. "He won't come up till it's finished and that might be years."

Charlatan's eyes gleamed fanatically. "We will build a raft," he said, just like Bevis or some such idiot.

Picklewit was not impressed. "Who will? What with?" he said.

Charlatan was already running for his motor bike.

The bold fellow, aflame with idealistic ardour, zoomed straight into Norwich despite the many turns and twists in the local roads, and dismounted outside the Public Library. It took him a long time to pull the wretched machine on to its stand, but once he had accomplished this feat he pushed into the building and caused a sensation by holding up his hand and shouting: "Hold everything! Charlatan is here!" You are surprised at such decisive, vigorous action from the usually nervous and jittery Charlatan? Silly readers! It is a well-known fact that to create convincing characters one must make them *self-contradictory*. Shakespearean critics say so, and they should know, shouldn't they? In any case, once caught up on the wings of idealistic zeal, C. like many another normally "Perhaps"-ridden fellow, was capable of—almost—anything. Even causing a sensation in a Public Library was a mere bagatelle to him in this exalted mood, and he was pretty good at bagatelle.

The borrowers and stealers glanced at him with momentary

curiosity, then returned to the shelves. Mad people abound in Public Libraries. But the girl at the desk ran to him with fluttering bosom and said: "Oh *do* come in, Mr. Charlatan. Mr. Päperjacket, the Librarian, is a great admirer of your movement."

Charlatan blushed charmingly and followed her lissome form as it clicked and clacketed across the parquet flooring. The Librarian Päperjacket was squatting on the desk of his office like a Buddha.* He had heavy brows, heavy floppy hairy ears and a heavy jaw. He was, in fact, a heavyweight. The girl said eagerly: "Mr. Päperjacket, guess who has called to see you? Mr. Charlatan! Isn't it wonderful?"

The effect on the Librarian was magical. Or at least, well-nigh. He uncoiled himself, rose to a height of at least seven feet and advanced on Charlatan holding out a hand so huge that Charlatan nearly fainted on the spot. Advancing towards people with outstretched hand is inadvisable if you happen to be standing on a table and Päperjacket came rather a purler, but being the noble fellow he was (how could he be anything else, dash it) he only groaned and moaned for ten minutes or so, then rose bravely, waved away the giggling girl and said: "Ee, boot ah'm right glad to see thee, Mr. Charlatan, I am that. There's nowt between the old country and perdition säve thee."

"Thanks," Charlatan said modestly. "We try to combine a becoming humility with a stern determination, if you get my meaning."

"What I've been so glad to nooooooote in your movement, Mr. Charlatan," Päperjacket went on, "is that you've got none of they flighty French notions, no existentialism or any of that lark. English to the backbone and good old Yorkshire pudding, there is no batsman like our Len Hooton, up the forward defensive ströke. That's the recipe for English regenerätiön."

"We see eye to eye," said Charlatan with the characteristic

* We are aware that Buddha wasn't in the habit of squatting on office tables; indeed it's generally accepted that he eschewed offices altogether, but metaphors, similes and so forth are the very devil.

exaggeration of the idealist, for he only came up to Päper-jacket's chest.

"Ah've been wanting to meet thee for a long time," said Päperjacket. He lowered his voice. "Tis all loost and doom, d'ye see. All around us stretches an intolerable landscäpe of loost and doom."

"You are unfortunately right," said Charlatan, nodding and nidding eighteen and a half to the dozen. "And it is our mission to combat them."

"Brävely said," chanted Päperjacket. "Loost rampäging in the streets and cafés, doom settling in our oooomes."

"Ooooomes?" said Charlatan.

"Hearths and ooomes," explained Päperjacket.

"Oh, you mean oooooomes!" said Charlatan. "Dash it, you've got me doing it now."

"That's just it," said Päperjacket. "Everybody's doing it, even Bert Laggs, everybody's doing it, loost, loost and doom," and he began shaking his enormous legs in a sort of kind of jitterbug fantasia.

"Jonathan Dean the webbing construct wizard is in the district," Charlatan said, bringing the librarian to order. "We are determined to reach his houseboat—a prison in which he now sits, sorrowful and forlorn, an outcast from society. I have formulated a daring plan. Can we borrow a copy of Kon-Tiki from the library?"

Päperjacket laid his hand on Charlatan's shoulder, very gently despite its size. "All the resources of this library are at your disposooosal," he said sombrely, "in your campaign against the encircling doom. But I have a request to mäke."

Charlatan nidded and nodded encouragingly.

"The period of loan is fourteen days, and the boooook should be returned on or before the däte stamped in the front."

"Fair enough," said Charlatan. "But what is your request?"

"Let us not be unduly hästy, my friend," said Päperjacket, though not unkindly, no. "I moost remind you that in the event of infectious disease the book mooost on nö account be returned to the Library, but to the Medical Officer of Health.

Noooooice of infectious disease should be given to the Librarian immediately." Then he added in surprise, "That's me, of course."

"Very good," said Charlatan. "I'll keep it away from Mr. Brute. His habits are so reckless."

"Now for my request," said Päperjacket, "Take the book but take me with it. I'm heart and soul with you in your project. Let me dedicate myself to England and to Yorkshire pudding, to the extirpation of Loost and Doom. I am an oomble man, but I could catalogue your books as they've never been catalogued before——"

"True," Charlatan said.

"—and help with exhibitions and that. Is there room for me, lad, is there room for me?" His eyes glowed with pathetic rosbolation.

Charlatan hesitated, but only for a minute. True it would be an extra mouth to feed, and what would Picklewit say? This fellow was so big, though, he might scare off Handonose, and that would be worth any sacrifice.

"Do you like sausages?" Charlatan said.

"Sausages! I should say. After Yorkshire pudding I'd say there's nowt like a good fat burnt sausage to keep the soul healthy and immune from the temptations of Loost and the depredations of Doom."

Charlatan breathed a sigh of relief. "Päperjacket, we welcome you," he declared. "Come!"

A few minutes later they were roaring out of Norwich, Päperjacket overflowing the pillion seat, a copy of Kon-Tiki buried in his enormous hand. Every time they passed a couple dawdling among the leafless lanes he shouted mournfully into Charlatan's ear: "'Tis all loost, d'ye see. . . ."

During the next few days the camp rang with the fluttering of paper and the hammering of nails as the team converted the Kon-Tiki volume into a raft to transport them across the watery waste. Snagg, of course, wouldn't budge, or boodge as Päperjacket put it, for he asserted that he had only been engaged, or engaged as Päperjacket put it, to drive the panttechnicon and oil the TV apparatus. The willing Polé,

however, allowed himself to be harnessed to clumps of paper and his hard-working enthusiasm was a stimulus to all the others (except, of course, Snagg). The raft began to take shape—a Kon-Tiki volume base covered o'er with slats of wood, the gaps filled by Stodge with porridge. Tripod took innumerable photographs but they were still coming out upside down. Picklewit, with from or by a stroke of genius, discovered that this didn't matter if you stood on your head to look at them.

There was an unfortunate outbreak of quarrelling which it took all Charlatan's dithering tact to settle amicably. First of all Stodge claimed that the Pole was eating his supply of porridge oats.

Then Päperjacket complained loudly and loostily about Brute's preoccupation with The Other Sex. Brute replied that he wasn't particular about the sex, that willingness was all, and this drove Päperjacket into a denunciatory frenzy.

"'Tis our söle object to exterminate Loost," he roared. "Loost leads irrevocably to Doom, and we want noone o they frenchified notions."

"Life without loost is ashes and doost," mocked Brute.

"You're a disgrace to the expedition," ranted Päperjacket. "Oone of these days I'll läy violent hands on thee, yong man," and he whirled a pickaxe terrifyingly round his head.

Over the marshes boomed the voice of the enemy:

"The wäy leads onward to thy doom.

Prepare thesens—so maa es saloom."

• Beside himself with räge Päperjacket rampaged to Pickletan and Charlawit and complained bitterly about Brute's behaviour, a piece of alliteration of which he was joostly proud. It took them a long time to persuade him that although Brute was not all he might be morally and ideologically speaking, he was a brilliant statistician and had already proved that Australian wine was better than Bordeaux. Picklewit went on:

"I'd like to make this point about loost, I mean lust, Mr. Päperjacket. Naturally we are all against loost, but admitting that it does exist, we are forced to point out to the world that

under the conditions prevailing British loost is at least superior to any other kind. Isn't that so?"

"Well of course!" cried Päperjacket.

"Exactly," said Picklewit. "And owing to certain circumstances Miss Hourì has become our symbol in the eyes of the world. She is a concrete example of an absolutely essential principle: British Girls Are Growing Bigger. Nothing must stop her swelling, expanding and enlarging in every direction. The fact is, Mr. Päperjacket, that Brute is responsible for the increase in girth, though neither he nor the public seems aware of this. His influence on Hilda is decisive."

"Good gracious," said Päperjacket. "Good gracious," said Charlatan. "Precisely," said Picklewit, and they glawped at each other like cod on a slab.

At last the raft was ready. With a cheer the gallant elastic band shoved it into the black and sinister water. Stodge's porridge fillings dissolved, the water came bubbling through the gaps, the paper became sodden and the raft, waterlogged, sogged hopelessly beneath the surface. A disappointing end to a bold venture. They all sloshed hopelessly off to bed. The camp slept in shame under a heavy brooding sense of impending doom.

Next morning Charlatan and Picklewit were awakened by brisk neighing. At the door of the tent stood the Gallup Pole, pawing the ground impatiently.

"For St. George and Sikorski," he cried. "I have a plan. I will swim to the *Wasserschloss* and direct the attention of Mr. Dean to our presence scx. Then perhaps he will propel the ship towards the shore."

Charlatan and Picklewit gazed at him in speechless admiration.

"Noble Pole," said Charlatan, who unfortunately never remained speechless for long. "One day your loyalty will be rewarded."

Picklewit kicked him sharply on the ankle. "Don't be a fool," he hissed. "He might hold us to that."

The Pole smiled. "It is nothing," said he, "we are a nautical race; who has not heard of Conrad?"

Anxiously they watched him strip off his tights, saw his gleaming white body plunge into the dark waters, beheld him piercing his way through mercilessly buffeting breakers, and with relief witnessed his twitching ascent over the rail of the houseboat.

A moment later he emerged from its bowels leading the bewildered Dean, who was almost completely enveloped in white webbing, by the hand. The painter drew a webbing telescope from a large poacher's pocket in his webbing jacket and aimed at the shore. They watched breathlessly. Dean waved a hand and disappeared below. He returned dragging more enormous lengths of webbing in which both he and the Pole became so entangled that for quite a long time they were completely lost to sight. Finally, however, Dean's plan in all its pristine daring and breath-taking ingenuity was revealed. He was building a webbing bridge! A large notice was erected on deck, reading DEAN'S PATENT WEBBING STIFFENER, and the watchers saw Dean begin to feed webbing into a machine run by a two-stroke engine. Slowly, O so slowly a narrow snake of thin but immensely thick and strong webbing girders with sturdy webbing cross-planks, pushed its way from ship to shore. Tirelessly Dean and the Pole played out the webbing until at last, with a ragged cheer, the watchers grasped its extremity and hauled it on to the bank.

Everyone hurled himself on to the bridge, anxious to be the first to greet this Grand Old Man of English Art—everyone, that is, except Joe Snagg, who announced that he wasn't barmy yet, even if the others were, and refused to budge from his pantechnicon.

Half-way across it became obvious that the load was too much for the delicate structure. The bridge began to sag. Terror mounting, Brute shouldered Tripod aside and ram-paged towards the houseboat with Hilda squealing behind. Gradually the bridge sank below the water, over the ankles, then the knees, then the waists of the fleeing crusaders. Moaning horribly Stodge (who was very short) threshed with his arms as the cruel sea surged around his neck. Only

Päperjacket appeared safe, for he was so huge that the water only reached his knees when everyone else was swallowing the stuff.

At this point Charlatan showed once more the sterling character which lay beneath the gentle, almost ineffectual exterior. Ever since boyhood he had longed to be the hero of some disaster at sea. Now opportunity beckoned. He stood stock-still, oblivious of the water lapping round his breast, while the others dashed for safety—Brute, indeed, was scrambling up the side of the houseboat.

"Launch the lifeboats," roared Charlatan. "Women and children first. Any man attempting to go out of turn will be shot without warning."

All the others had now climbed aboard, and stood watching Charlatan's brave display in consternated bewilderment. They looked a bedraggled company, probably because that's what they were.

"Oh God our help in Ages Past," sang Charlatan in a stupendous baritone.

"Charlatan, you blithering fool, get on board!" shouted Picklewit, losing patience.

"The captain always goes down with his ship," cried Charlatan. The water was now over his shoulders.

"Mr. Charlatan, don't leave us," Tripod screamed. "Don't leave us! Think of your dear ones!"

"I am," Charlatan coldly replied.

Joe Snagg watched sceptically from the pantechnicon. "He'll get water on is cylinder ead afore long," he opined.*

"Nearer my God to Thee!" sang Charlatan, the water lapping his pointed and inadequately shaven chinlet.

"Doom DOOM," Päperjacket bellowed. "I see thy Vast Allergic Form Approaching. Ay, Doom, a horrid watery doom, ever the reward of Loost, lad!"

Charlatan opened his mouth to utter another valorous statement but the water flowed in and he disappeared, leaving a few bubbles behind.

* The word "opined" has long been a favourite of ours, ever since we first met it in the *Boys' Own Paper*.

"It is incumbent upon me," cried the Pole, "to plunge in and rescue that noble fellow." He attempted to tear off his tights, having forgotten, good honest chap, that he already stood stark naked.

Dean pushed him aside, thus; nudge, thrust, titter-tootter. "No," he said. He brandished a long waggly webbing boat-hook and amid lusty, and in Brute's case lustful, cheers, fished Charlatan out of the water. He held him dangling for a while, till the bundle had stopped dripping and choking, then dumped him deftly on the deck.

Tripod sprang on the heroic ruin to apply artificial respiration, forgot that he still held his shooting-stick and gave Charlatan such a nifty stab that the wet idealist jumped to his feet with a skirl of bagpipes and was pronounced cured by all and, of course, sundry.

"There's one point, you fellows," Stodge said, waking from his trance, "while you were stamping on one another to scramble aboard I seemed somehow to notice that girl Whatsername if I wasn't dreaming fall off sploshet and gubble gubble gubble."

"What! My bolster! Gone! Gubble gubble!" cried Brute. "Where shall I get another wench in this Godforsaken wilderness?"

"There! Look! I spy with my little eye! To starboard on the port bow," whinnied the Pole, shimmying a palsied finger.

There she lay, all that day, in the Bay of Piscay O, fifty yards off and floating peacefully upon the waters, like unto bread.

"Oh fabulous day, when loost was cast upon the waters of Babylon," intoned Päperjacket.

"Allow me," suggested the Pole, somewhat wearily, "to rescue the fair young lady."

"No," said Dean. "Currents."

"Where are the buns?" said Piblewit eagerly but Dean silenced him with a dirty look, and made a strange circular motion with his hand. Brute accepted this with delight as a

peculiarly obscene gesture but everyone else knew that Dean meant to indicate the course which Hilda's recumbent form would take. With a final wide sweep of gesture Dean indicated that Hilda would eventually reach the boat without help from them. So they all trooped off to dry themselves. An hour later a gentle bump against the stern caused Charlatan to peer through a porthole. He saw Hilda bobbing gently up and down, fast asleep. Brute offered to dry her all over with his own handkerchief but Päperjacket was so incensed that he had to give up the idea.

What a glorious evening they had! Down in Dean's cabin, seated in Dean's webbing chairs, drinking Dean's patent potion distilled from jute, telling jokes to which no one listened and answering questions which no one had asked. . . . Oh yersss yersss, jolly fun, etcetera and so forth as all must agree. Pity the Pole wouldn't join them but Duty called. He insisted on climbing the rigging to keep a lookout for sharks in wolf's clothing.

Charlatan, Picklewit and Stodge took it in turns to beam at their old friend, and their old friend soberly nodded his head up, down, up, down, up, down, to indicate good fellowship. Now and again C., P., or S. could no longer restrain himself from embracing the Vacuist hero. Even Tripod had a go once, despite his shooting-stick, because Tripod couldn't bear to feel he was an Outsider. (Horrible spirits lurked Outside.) Pity Dean was such a taciturn old root, Vacuist, as one might say, even in speech.

"Now, dear Jonathan, tell us all about yourself," said Charlatan.

"No," said Dean. "Society doesn't want webbing. Dried coudung to society." He gargled sternly.

"You've had a lousy deal," Picklewit agreed. "Everybody has a lousy deal except sharpers with cards up their sleeves or blithering idiots who don't know a card from a cracknel sandwich. There was no need for that magistrate to call your Buckingham Palace construct 'that disgusting stringbag.' But then, there was no need for the other magistrate to describe me as 'a good-for-nothing leadswinger, a disgrace to the

State.'” He swigged moodily. “Still, old man, you’re among friends now. Untrustworthy ones, naturally. Being trustworthy is too much damned fag these days, but at least we bring good news. Those louts Brute and Päperjacket, those nincompoops Tripod, Stodge and Charlatan may look like backyard sweepings, but at least they’re willing to help raise the flag of Vacuism, once more.”

Dean glowered round the company. “No,” he said. “Where is Sturgeon MacReady? Where’s Eruc Tate?”

“Time takes its toll,” said Picklewit smugly. “Sturgeon has taken up photographs on the seabed. Money in it. He’s faked up an aquarium you know, goes down five feet and comes back with Depths of the Ocean Marvels. He’s in the Caribbean at the moment. Eruc Tate was called up, thank God, and is now in Malaya. According to his last letter he reads Vacuist poems to his colleagues when on guard. But Ponce! Ponce is a mystery, the lousy skate. He’s taken a job as columnist on the *Daily Peek*. But friend or foe, partisan or quisling, we know not.” He took another gulp and sneered thoughtfully. “All the same,” he added, “we can have a ruddy good guess.”

“Doom will descend upon us all,” boomed Päperjacket suddenly, thinking it was about time he got in a word edgewise or anglefoolish.

“True,” said Dean.

“All is not lost, even if it’s loost,” Picklewit rejoined, and proceeded to outline in a few incisive succinct words the present campaign. “We’re sticking pins in the pants of Britain,” he finished up. “What a chance, Jonathan. Join the circus before the tent collapses.”

Dean could not conceal his interest. “Mphmsnshooofle,” he said, and buried his moustache in his hands.

“It’s the kind of opportunity,” pressed Picklewit, “that only occurs when you’ve long ago given up in disgust. We’ll soak the taxpayers for webbing money—there’ll soon be a traditional saying ‘It’s money for old webbing’ if I have anything to do with it—and you can leave a trail of decisively meaningless constructs all over Britain. With official backing you

can decorate every Post Office in Lincolnshire with Nought, Nil, Nothing, Minus and Blank. Work hard enough and you could annoy the populace so much there'll be riots, ructions and national indigestion."

"After all," said Stodge unexpectedly, "discouragement is one thing and so forth, after all nobody ever said anything except 'Blurts' and 'Boug' to me in my life but still I mean one's got one's pride and one's vocation and one's sense of craftsmanship and one's glimmering of marginal dances and after all, I've thrown down the gauntlet in porridge."

"It's the cheapest way I've struck of slithering round the country," put in Brute. "I've measured every leg in Oxfordshire and multiplied by sex. I've examined every variety of underclothing in Staffs and all the shorts in Notts. Took some untying, some of them, as well."

"And you should see the letters I've written to bakers," squealed Hilda, with a reproving pout at Brute, the brute.

"Loost lies doomed in every library," added Päperjacket.

"As for me," Tripod said, "although my photographs are upside down, they do reveal an England never seen before."

Only Charlatan was silent. We can't think of anything for the ass to say.

Dean rose to his feet and to the occasion, a magnificent figure in his webbing suit and flowing moustache. "Umph," he said. "Fooms. Gruntage. Snoof. I'll come."

They all cheered blearily and embraced each other ecstatically, particularly Hilda and Brute; much to Päperjacket's loud disgust Picklewit too embraced Hilda, whispering: "Delicious balloon," and then bellowing out: "Up Vacuism! Down with Art! Up stairs! Down braces! Down with regularity! Up heaval! Down side! Up pingham! Yaroople! Snorbs! Good old Bob Cherry!" The celebrations were interrupted by a fierce cry of "Ship Ahoy!" from that egregious Pole.

"Webbing rifles in the lockers," Dean snapped. "Grumphet!" and they all poured on deck to repel boarders.

It was only a Post Office lad splashing his way from shore in water wings.

"Telegrams, cockies," he said, saluting smartly and shipping a good deal of water. "Mr. Charlatan, cocky?"

"I am Mr. Charlatan, denizen of the deep," replied that worthy.*

"Mr. Picklewit, cocky?" said the boy.

"Hand it over, snot-nose," snarled Picklewit. "Or we'll sink you without trace."

"Mr. Picklewit cocky, *and* Mr. Charlatan, cocky?" said the boy.

"Both!" they cried, like a Chorus from Euripides, and I'll rippa you.

"Catch then, cockies," said the boy and flung a fat packet of buff envelopes into the air. Päperjacket made a brilliant catch at mid-off as the little blighter foamed away.

There was a universal quiver and flutter of excitement as Picklewit ripped open the first communication from the Outer Dark.

"With you in Spirit. Madam Blavatsky," he read.

They all yarooped.

"This says," announced Charlatan. "Flying saucers available if required. Fortean Society, New York."

More cheers.

Picklewit: "Keep it up, and in ten years time we may be able to score a goal against Luxemburg. Rous, Football Association."

Charlatan: "Watching progress with admiration. Down with the fascist hyenas. Mao Tse Tung."

• Picklewit: "Watching progress with admiration. Get in there and keep pitching. Joe McCarthy."

Charlatan: "Superb resistance. You are our bulwark against outsiders. Sudan Club, Khartoum."

Picklewit: "Are you teetotal if so with you up to a point. Lady Astor."

Charlatan: "But me no butts with you up to the elbows. Rocky Marciano."

"This is stupid," said Picklewit angrily. "If everyone's with us, who the devil are we fighting against? I shall lose heart."

* This phrase too has long been a favourite with our favourites.

"That's strange," said Charlatan. "This form seems to be blank."

Tripod leapt forward, snatched the form and held it over a lighted match in the shelter of a bulkhead. "Ah, I thought so," he said. "Invisible writing." Then he read out :

"A sorry plight, to pin your hopes on webbing—
A bee-torn web, 'gainst Brotherhood's strong arm !
The power of logic, defined by Susan Stebbing
Would utter pish ! and then—maa es salaam."

CHAPTER TWELVE

*In which British Television wanders
in a wilderness of webbing*

WELL, READERS, YOU can now see where things stand, eh? We hope so, at any rate, because we're depopulated if we can. However, it does seem clear that by some strange quirk of fortune the Empire has begun to focus its attention on the progress or regress as the case may be of the Springthorpe Cultural Mission, and that opinion on the subject or object as the case may be is sharply divided, somewhat in this manner: For—All Vacuists, ex-Vacuists and Vacuists manqué, Mao Tse Tung, Senator McCarthy, the Fortean Society, Madam Blavatsky and the powers of the air, the Football Association and (with reservations) Lady Astor; Against—*The Global News*, the *Daily Depress* Sniggerley Bevels, Sir Baldron Withers, the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the NUNS (who had sent Hilda a note severely censuring her conduct, causing her to weep on Brute's shoulder), the National Association of Detritus Manufacturers, the Royal Academy, Arthur Wigstole, Norman Wackstead, Horace Wucker, Nomes Pirites and others too numerous and revolting to mention.

Sir Arnold had not been misinformed (except by Picklewit): Sir Baldron *did* denounce the Mission in the House, referring to "hooliganism," which was "making Britain a laughing-stock before the world," and "Communist scheming." He demanded an investigation and suggested that the pasts of Messrs. Charlatan and Picklewit contained many dark

secrets. There were cries of "Resign," "Retract," "Apologise," "Hear hear," and even "Good old Baldron." A Trade Union man woke up shouting automatically "You men must go back to work," and had to have water poured over him by Mr. Speaker.

Picklewit and Charlatan themselves were not idle. No. By no means. As you shall hear. Picklewit, issuing the Gallup Pole, Tripod, Päperjacket and Brute with webbing rifles despatched them on an expedition into the mushy marshes to round up Handonose elements which might be lurking there as through a glass darkly. Charlatan sat in Dean's cabin concocting indignant letters to the Press. Picklewit took Hilda, Brute safely out of the way, to a lonely part of the deck.

"Miss Houri," he said.

"Yes, Mr. Picklewit?"

"Hilda."

"O Mr. Picklewit!"

"What is Brute to you, Hilda?"

"O, Mr. Picklewit!"

"Call me Pickle."

"Oh no, I *couldn't*!"

He pinched her bottom carefully. "H'm," he said thoughtfully. The texture was odd, distinctly ambiguous. However. "If you can grow so wonderfully vast for him alone, Hilda, what could you do for both of us, my lovely flower?"

"Oh you shouldn't *say* such things, Mr. Picklewit!"

"I know I shouldn't, Hilda my dainty hippo, but see how rigorously I have feigned indifference until this moment. I *had* to speak! That is why I sent Brute away into the marshes pursuing will o' the wisps. But don't imagine I shall show my burning passion when they return. Not likely! In the circumstances it wouldn't be wise. I'm the boss, after all. I must keep their respect. I shan't be able to pinch your delightful rear nearly as much as I'd like, but you'll always know that though my fingers are puritanically still they itch for you. . . ." He vanished into the cabin with a sigh, leaving Hilda gazing dreamily across the grey water.

"I hope he's not going to pinch me very much," she softly intoned. "Scientific nips like that might be dangerous." Sinister, eh? Mysterious? Quite.

Picklewit entered the cabin, swept Charlatan's indignant letters aside and with a brief "Nonsense, Charlatan, that's undignified," scribbled a telegram to the Editor of the *Daily Peek*: "Send columnist Ponce to Scrogg's Hotel, Wolverhampton and will make revelation Picklewit Springthorpe Cultural Mission." "There, that should fix them."

An hour later there was a shout from the shore. The expedition had returned dragging an exhausted, muddy, groaning Snagg. It appeared that, spread out and creeping dexterously like beetles through the sharp rushes and bitter grasses, their webbing rifles at the ready, Brute, the Pole, Tripod and Päperjacket had found Joe Snagg in a bemused, confused, and floundering state of mind, wallowing in stagnant water. As he put it himself: "I've broke me half-shaft and me clutch is useless."

"What happened? Where are they? Dogs! Schwein!" howled the Pole, galluping to and fro like a demented unicorn. "I defy you, enemies of European civilisation! Show yourselves if you dare and *gehunlichkeit* your *meister* scx."

"Let's get back, it's wet here and not a woman to be seen," grumbled Brute.

"It was dark, see," said Snagg. "I was cruisin' nicely at forty through me dreams and all of a sudden—O, RIBLE!"

"The fiends!" said Tripod, turning pale, and practising back defensive strokes with his shooting-stick as his eyes darted terrified glances this way, that way and of course the other way.

"Ar, fiends," Snagg agreed. "It was dark see, like I ses, and ANDS got me—ANDS. Nowt clean and olesome like clamps or that but horrible uman ANDS. Ar. They dragged me outside and there was a jabbering and gabbling such as you never did, so I nearly went off me rocker box, I did s'raight. Next thing I know, ere I was, if you get me, and I'd never ave got out, never, not if you adn't come along, because I don't walk, well, of course not, don't old with it, it's against

me mechanical principles and I can't tell where I am, not without I'm on a road, and the dear old pantechicon ain't in sight and . . ."

They dragged him to his feet.

It was with difficulty that they persuaded him across the restored webbing bridge to the houseboat.

"Hmmm," said Picklewit when he heard this sorry tale. Snagg, of course, was expendable, but how determined and menacing this continual psychological warfare proved their enemies to be. . . . The kidnapping of Tripod, the kidnapping of Hilda, the kidnapping of Snagg. Who was next? Who indeed? And how subtle, too, that no effort was made to hide the kidnapped but only to scare, disorientate, disintegrate, entropify the whole organisation through fear, anxiety, worry and oh dear me. They were up against it, there could be no doubt. Who could he rely on? Only the Gallup Pole. And how far could one trust such a strange and baffling enigma? Anyhow, these marshes were clearly unsafe. It was obvious that a dispersal of forces must be undertaken. The Mission was too easy a target when clustered in a solid mass on a houseboat. They must move on, on, on, into the dubious future.

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The company left Hickling, breaking asunder like a dropped bottle. Tripod, told to snap prize tomatoes in Cumberland, pounded off on his shooting-stick for Somerset, where he intended to photograph miniature pumpkins. However, as he remarked to Charlatan "I'm beginning to wonder, Mr. Charlatan, whether subtlety does not in some manner defeat itself. Were I to go where I intended to go, would not the very simplicity of the move bewilder the Fiends?" Charlatan didn't know. Stodge went to Scotland to interest Scotts Porridge Oats in Vacuist sculpture, but forgot all about it in Carlisle and bought thirty pounds worth of biscuits; the bill was sent to Sir Arnold. Brute was told to go to Birmingham but went to Scunthorpe for personal reasons, the brute. Päperjacket set off for Bradford, the home of his youth, where

he had recently been appointed President of the local Doom Club, which was bringing out a new edition of Domesday Book. The Pole put one finger to the side of his nose and vanished underground.

Dean's webbing equipment was a blasted nuisance. The only place for it was the panttechnicon and Snagg objected. He told them he was a Conscientious Objector. They told him to get webbing. He protested. But Picklewit had a trump card. "Snagg," he said, "if you get that webbing aboard within half an hour I'll let you help the B.B.C. boys with their TV camera."

"TV camera?" gasped Charlatan.

"TV camera," repeated Picklewit, like onions. "I've had a letter from Sir Arnold. I'll read it to you :

"Dear Picklewit, Unless something is done to justify the existence of the Mission quickly not only will you find yourself in jail but difficulties will abound in other directions. I have worked very hard to arrange a method by which you can rehabilitate the Entropic Investigation as a Cultural Project. The B.B.C. have undertaken to televise a Typical British Garden Fête which you will organise within the week. Naturally you must not have anything to do with the actual programme. That would be fatal. The B.B.C. will send down men capable of performing a simple operation without bungling the thing hopelessly. But since the programme is to be under our auspices as it were, get something going quickly, before all is lost. Communicate with Aubrey Babble, the Producer, immediately."

"That's different," said Snagg. There was nothing he liked better than an opportunity to ruin some machine or gadget.

"Oh Picklewit, what a glorious opportunity!" cried Charlatan.

"You keep out of it," Picklewit said. "We want no idealism on the TV screen. It's obvious what's happened. They've run out of parlour games, the audiences are getting so maudlin and fond of bald dolts calling each other Dick and Harry, while titled glamour girls and out-of-work actresses call each other Euthanasia, Sybil, Migraine, Décolletage and whatever

else their names weren't when they were christened that the B.B.C. feels that British puritanism must step in. It's time they were educated. They want to show how dismally boring British life can be. It's up to us. This is only the beginning of a drab and drear spring and any Vicar who held a garden fête at this time of year must be raving mad. Fine. Let's find that Vicar, and fill the screen with webbing. All aboard the pantechnicon boys." . . . And off they went.

As soon as the vast ridicule rolled into the village of Nether Millstone Picklewit shouted "This is it! Stop!" They all piled out. "We're going to see the Vicar," Picklewit told Charlatan. "Whatever you do, don't mention God. It isn't done in polite society." They marched off.

The Vicar was an old buffer named Gudge who collected coins and when he woke up ran bazaars and whist drives like one o'clock to get money to rebuild the Church which fell down regularly every year just about the time that some Archbishop told the Press that the hydrogen bomb should be outlawed but that it was all right for Christians to kill people provided the Government said they were enemies.

"Oh good gracious, is it summer already?" said Gudge. "Oh well naturally in that case Miss Willis, Mrs. Dillis and Miss Collis will want to organise a fête or two. As for me, I don't care for small boys and egg and spoon races but it's all one, since I can't do anything about it anyway. You see, I once tried to tell the truth in a sermon and there was a strong move to get me certified. This is to go on television, you say? Will Gilbert Harding be in it? No? Thank heaven, then I agree."

Aubrey Babble and his gang came down with cameras and a line of public school talk and began hocusing and pocusing around. Charlatan tried to look like a script-writer, executive and fête-organiser combined, but Babble kept saying "Not just now, old boy," and shooing him away. Picklewit disappeared the moment the gang arrived, and Charlatan felt a bit suspicious, because he was often in sinister confabulation with Dean. They kept handling webbing as if they meant nobody any good. Charlatan didn't like the way that

Picklewit kept taking aside the embittered Snagg, who had been driven away from the cameras by a bevy of engineers, technicians and so forth, and pointing to the things as if encouraging the great oaf to commit sabotage.

Anyhow, on the great day, they installed themselves in the village hall, which was equipped with a TV set, together with the ladies of the Women's Institute, who sniffed and ate buns. The scenes for televising included a beauty contest for cows, an obstacle race, bowling for a pig and a scene from a jolly play by school-children.

"You wait," Picklewit told Charlatan, who was concerned to note that Dean and Snagg were nowhere in sight. "I hope there won't be a Snagg in the proceedings," Picklewit went on, and gave what Charlatan considered to be a grossly vulgar laugh.

From the very third moment Charlatan's worst fears were realised. The camera seemed to twitch away from its inspection of a cow's rump and immediately the screen became filled with webbing scattered in disorder. The camera twitched back to the cow, then to webbing again, and the webbing began to writhe horribly. A foot shot into view, then Dean's tousled head appeared, bloodshot eyes stared about, and the head vanished. The writhing continued. The camera got the jitters: cow, webbing, vicar, school-children struggling into tableau scene, driven by irate teacher, cow, webbing, more webbing, Dean, webbing. The writhing continued.

Picklewit glanced at the women of the institute and said: "See that stuff? Webbing, you know. Of great educational interest, a display like this."

"Oh Picklewit this is terrible, humiliating, alarming, catastrophic, unfortunate, frightening, uncomfortable, dear oh dear what shall we do?" Charlatan bleated.

"Do? We don't have to do anything. Dean and Snagg are managing fine. Never thought much of Snagg before but he's doing ultra-riproaring-stuff this afternoon."

Suddenly Snagg's voice sounded above the webbing. He was using Language. So was someone else—a technician, engineer or what have you, Charlatan supposed.

The women began to murmur, struggle, mumble, twitch, fidget and fumble about. Now a head, now a foot, now an arm and even a bottom waved itself ineffectively in the air amid the webbing mass, and as suddenly subsided. A new figure bounded across the screen—Joe Snagg, very red-faced, probably drunk and pursued by a couple of technical engineers. They all dived into the webbing. A cow's face replaced the ghastly scene. But now the webbing really began to fly, moving through the air into the cow's vicinity, so that the brute turned and mooed off. There was a scurry of legs, torsos, arms, shoulders and behinds not to mention the enveloping webbing. The whole screen seemed to spin like a catherine wheel. The Secretary of the Institute rushed to the set and switched it off.

"This is disgraceful!" she cried.

"Not at all," said Picklewit suavely. "That's an awful lot of webbing for a small screen, but you wait till we get the deepies."

All the women began to scream at once: "Waste of public money! Sir Baldron was right! I shall write to Sniggerley Bevels. We have been insulted! Wait till we tell the Vicar! Throw them out!"

The secretary pointed to the door: "GO!" she squiped. All the other women did the same. Charlatan and Picklewit were surrounded by a forest of trees with one-way branches, all sternly pointing towards the exit.

They slunk out with dignity.

(The reason for this melodramatic behaviour on the part of the Ladies of the Women's Institute was that they had lately been reading a play in which Lady Mary Twitherington said "Go!" to Sir Cedric Howps, who had made a suggestion which—well, really. The Secretary had read the part of Lady Twitherington and the opportunity seemed too good to miss. So it's no good muttering to yourselves "These boobies are slipping up on their psychology." Slipping up on our psychology, indeed! We have forgotten more than Stampf-Coch ever knew. Which isn't saying much, when you

consider how Gunk dealt with him in *Weltanschauung Psygeführung Rundfunk*.)

The pantechnicon came rumbling towards them down the village street. "Get on board, little chillun, get on board," roared Snagg, quite above and beside himself. Dean was leaning out of the back shouting his war-cry "No!" in cherumblian tones.

"Oh good gracious," said Charlatan. "We're ruined."

"Op up beside me, Charlie, old stalk," Snagg bellowed. "We're Alabamy bound."

"Quick!" snapped Picklewit. "Those women are going to lynch us. They're out for blood."

And indeed, the Ladies, deeming a display of Melodramatics insufficient, had bethought themselves of a film they had seen in Market Garbage the other day, in which film several gangsters' molls had thrown vitriol about and generally comported themselves like Frenzies for the love of "Slugs" Maloney. Armed with hatpins, hairpins and umbrellas, they surged towards the Snaggian velocipede, howling ferociously. Picklewit pulled open the door, heaved Charlatan up by collar and seat, scrambled on to the running board and the pantechnicon lurched away, Joe swinging the wheel recklessly and singing: "I'll hang out my washing on the Barrel, when you get your Knees up Mother Brown," to a tune he had recently composed himself.

The first thing they did at Wolverhampton was to remove their luggage and motor bikes from the pantechnicon and send Snagg to Shrewsbury, just to be rid of him. Charlatan, Picklewit, Dean and Hilda, poor dear, took a room over a bakehouse. They hadn't enough money to get two rooms over two bakehouses. Sir Arnold's promised cheque still hadn't arrived (or so Picklewit maintained) and they had to pull in their horns, as Charlatan put it. The landlady gave them her views on promiscuity and the modern woman and insisted on Hilda hanging up some curtain material round her bed. They were all so tired they didn't notice the pattern on the material until the morning—a hand-to-nose motif repeated ad infinitum only more so.

By the time they had got all the webbing in there was not a square inch of vacant space, apart from the bed and as soon as Hilda was on the bed that certainly wasn't vacant any more. They all fell asleep among the webbing.

The next morning there was a to-do. When Hilda got up the curtain fell down, when Charlatan strove to put up the curtain Hilda fell down, when Dean stood up Charlatan fell down, when Picklewit got up they all tripped over everyone else and fell on the bed which collapsed and Hilda cried: "Oh what would the NUNS say, oh, Quintus, they're at me!"

"Don't be a little ninny," snapped Picklewit. "You're a sacred symbol, we wouldn't dream of doing more than giving you a tiny pinch." He gave her one, she screamed, the landlady rushed in and shouted; "I thought as much! I said so to Wilf. Wilf, I said, you mark my words, they're up to no good up there, them lot, with that poor innocent little baggage and all that macaroni——"

"Macaroni!" shouted Dean. "My webbing! Macaroni!" He leapt at the landlady, who uttered a wild shriek and fled, tangled with a roll of webbing and fell down stairs bumpety bumpety blitherage bam.

"Police!" she cried. "Help!"

"We'd better get out of here," Picklewit said. "I wish we hadn't got rid of Snagg. It's aboard the motor bikes for us, and good-bye to your webbing Jonathan."

"No!" said Dean.

"There's no NO about it. I don't want to go to jail till it gets towards autumn. Come on, look lively."

There was only one thing for it. Dean swathed himself with webbing till he looked like a Michelin tyre advertisement, and all the others got armfuls of the stuff. They pushed off to the car park. Once on the motor bikes they dropped the webbing and once they'd got the webbing again they dropped the motor bikes. Then Picklewit remembered something. "Damn it, I promised I'd interview Ponce at some lousy hotel in Wolverhampton. We'll go along there, pretend we've got some money and borrow it off Gilbert when he

comes. At least they can't complain we've got no luggage, what with all this webbing."

They were hardly settled in the lounge balancing cups of afternoon tea on the arms of their hairy chairs when a Gentleman appeared. A tall, slim gentleman wearing an excellently cut, cleanly pressed suit of dove grey. A silvery-grey tie emerged from a perfectly white, uncreased collar. He wore a white carnation in his button-hole. He had a clean pink-and-white complexion, a smartly clipped fair moustache and hair sliced precisely by a parting like a footpath on a garden estate, just a little to the left, and perfectly smarmed with Brylcreem.

"Ponce!" said the three men as one.

"Madam!" said Ponce to Hilda, and bowed over her hand.

"If this is a business conference, Mr. Picklewit," said Hilda severely, "I must take proper steps," and whipped out her notebook from her handbag.

Ponce shrugged delicately, took a virgin silk handkerchief from his breast pocket, flicked the chair daintily and sat down, genteelly crossing his legs.

"So they've fallen for it, eh?" said Picklewit.

"I worked hard on your behalf, they succumbed," Ponce said. "And here I am. Ah, my dear boys, how nice to be with you again. Just like old times!"

"Except that you look a damned sight more prosperous," Picklewit said.

"Ah, well, I've sacrificed much to material welfare," Ponce said. "Whereas you, Jonathan, dear boy, still plough on constructing your masterpieces. I saw you on television, dear boy, and marvellous you looked, quite marvellous, as you grew like Venus from your foaming sea of webbing. Most, most impressive."

"Lam into the questions, then, Gilbert," Picklewit said. "We want to do a good job with the *Daily Peek*."

"Oh come, *really*, Pickle, you always were a mite abrupt," protested Ponce. "I *hate* my sordid trade, you understand, and just when I was feeling at ease among old friends and

their charming young lady secretary—ahem—to be forced once more into the rut of journalism. . . .” He spread his hands and hunched his shoulders. “Naturally our readers are interested. Everywhere I go I hear the same names on every lip—Charlatan and Picklewit.”

“Here it is, then,” Picklewit said. “Our statement : ‘Britain is in danger. Men in high places are the servants of the criminal Handonose Gang. Our cultural activities disguise our true work, which is the unmasking of the vultures in our midst. Let the guilty tremble. Anyone who attacks our work or us personally is in the pay of the Handonose League or of the Communists.’ How’s that?”

“Here, I say,” Ponce fluted, “that’s rather strong stuff, you know; I hardly imagine either Sir Arnold Springthorpe or the *Daily Peek* would approve.”

“To hell with both,” replied Picklewit tersely. “I don’t care a straw for Sir Arnold Springthorpe or the *Daily Peek*. If you won’t print it I’ll release it to all the other papers and one of them certainly will, if only to denounce us.”

“Don’t be too hasty!” Ponce cried, elevating an aesthetic hand. “Naturally I will take responsibility for insisting on its publication. However, it seems a bit *rash*. Do you think you are quite *wise*, Pickle?”

“Wise? Of course I’m not wise. Can’t afford to be. But I didn’t study the career of J. McCarthy for nothing. What you really mean is, Gilbert, that I’ve hit the nail on the head by mistake—the country is riddled with handonose elements, and you know it. Turn a British patriot inside out and what have you—Handonose. People interested in Great Britain as such are all swindlers and scallywags, you know it, I know it, everyone knows it. The only genuine characters are those interested in something more precise, practical and tolerable—like British football. To hell with patriotism. Up with football!”

“Oh, good gracious!” cried Charlatan. “Gilbert, you won’t quote him, will you? It will ruin our careers.”

“Go ahead and quote me,” Picklewit said. “They’re all out to liquidate us already, but the joke is, they can’t do it

now without noise and fuss and some of them are scared. Whenever they look in the mirror they feel ill. No wonder."

"Ha, ha, trust Pickle," Ponce said indulgently. "He *will* have his joke. Of course I understand the true nature of your work, my dear Charlie. You've no idea how boldly I stand up for you. It makes my blood boil when I hear ignorant fellows like Pieman abusing you. Why, only yesterday I cut him dead. I don't think you understand the strain I live under. Ah, how I envy you, my dears—living in poverty with your hearts whole and devoted to your art and your cause. While I, enduring a suite at Claridges, hate every moment of it. Oh, I don't know how much longer I can stand it all!"

"In fact, you're an idealist, Gilbert?" Picklewit said.

"Of course he's an idealist!" Charlatan cried indignantly.

"Well, naturally, in some measure I *am* an idealist," Gilbert said modestly.

"My personal aim is the elimination of all idealists," Picklewit said.

"Really! Pickle, you must be drunk!" gasped Charlatan.

"Good! Good!" said Dean—the famous artist's first contribution to the interview.

"Drunk," said Picklewit, "upon the beauty of Miss Hilda Houri."

"Oohooheehohmhee," trilled Hilda, blushing erily and mincing like a mincer.

Ponce smiled archly and moved his chair nearer to Picklewit's. "I'm delighted to hear you say that, my dear fellow," he whispered. "It won't do to neglect the basic needs of man, will it, after all? Is there anything I can do for you? One girl, however buxom, is hardly enough to go round, unless of course you *prefer* that kind of peculiarity, which I'm sure such an upright sterling character as Charlatan does not. Well, I've got a few exquisite little numbers on tap. Just say the word. There's a little blonde clown in Hackney who'd love to meet you. Really good class, too. Better than this, I can tell you" (he gracefully rolled an eye at Hilda). "I can

arrange everything in the discreetest way imaginable—no questions asked. Usual terms.”

“Charlatan is dedicated to his work, Ponce,” Picklewit replied sternly. “As for me, I don’t want to give you a handle for blackmail.”

Ponce shrugged his shoulders. “Oh well,” he said, “if you’re content with what you’ve got, everyone to his taste.” Then he brightened, visibly, like a Dutch cheese,* and continued more loudly. “Oh, most amusing, speaking of such matters in the broadest possible way; I met one of your own fellows on the way up. Let me see, what was his name? Brute, that’s it. Good chap, isn’t he? Having a hell of a time at Maidenhead. I was down there seeing—er—the sights.”

“Maidenhead! He was in Birmingham,” gasped Charlatan.

“Was he? Ah. He’d been moving about, he said. No wonder, any town would be too hot to hold him after a day or so, I should imagine. Anyhow I soon saw the type of lad he was, ready for anything new and strange, I thought. And when he told me he was a Vacuist Statistician—well. A most amusing fellow altogether. But don’t say a word, I only mention it because we’re all friends, but really—” he broke into a high-pitched giggle—“this will make you laugh! I introduced him to a calculating machine, a really superior piece of work, half a dozen tiers you know, works to seven decimal places, one of the best on my list. Well, Brute fell for her immediately, and not to put too fine a decimal point on it, ha ha, intimacy took place. You know how fast these machines produce results, and the fact is that everywhere Brute goes he’s followed about by a couple of little typewriters, howling for oil!”

There was a low moan from Hilda. She began to drum her feet on the floor, crying “Quin! Quin! How could you!” and similar stereotyped phrases.

“Good gracious!” said Ponce. “Like that, is it? What a lad old Quintus must be. However, I wasn’t to know, was I? I’d better be off, then, under the circumstances. If I were you

* We hope this simile is as baffling to you as it is to us.

I'd comfort the young balloon by all popping into bed with her pronto. Cheeryby. Be seeing you." He departed, waving his stick jauntily.

Hilda sobbed and sobbed; eventually, helped by Charlatan, she tottered upstairs and wept herself asleep.

Picklewit floundered angrily up and down the room. "That blithering fishwiper Ponce," he said. "She mustn't stop growing! She MUST NOT stop growing."

"I don't think Gilbert meant any harm, really," Charlatan said doubtfully. "He's a very good-hearted fellow at bottom."

"He's a good-bottomed fellow at heart," snarled Picklewit.

As if in answer a voice boomed over the hotel loudspeaker system :

"Is Ponce a friend? Is Ponce a foe?

Will he do good? Will he do harm?

What would you give, poor wretch, to know?

We know, my dears; Maa es salaam."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*In which two English gentlemen
encourage Industry*

EVERYWHERE THAT MARY went Charles Lamb was sure to go, or so I understand from Tupkin Lozenge's *Story of English Bards*. Similarly it may be proved, that everywhere Pickletan went a large parcel of sausages was sure to go, addressed to John Charlatan and Adam Picklewit, Springthorpe Cultural Mission, Bleary Arms, Bleary, Nummersex or The Three Chestnuts, Mafeking, Wilts. Picklewit promptly readdressed the parcel to say, c/o Hirple MacStrummoch, Achternaucherlochty, by Sprochellachie, Wester Ross or To Await Arrival, Post Office, Muckspread, but Post Office detectives always beat him and back the sausages came, gagging along on his track like a bevy of dachshunds. And, of course, the older they grew, the more they required the application of Hand to Nose. Significant, eh? Even the innocent Charlatan began to wonder why, if Sir Arnold could afford to send them sausages, he could not afford to send them the money with which to buy sausages. They now had no luggage left, having scapaed from innumerable hotels without paying. Only Dean's webbing remained to them. And yet . . . and yet . . . whenever things became too hot Picklewit always seemed able to cough up a quietening sum. Charlatan wondered. The more he wondered the more he wondered. Eventually he brought himself to ask Picklewit for some cash. Picklewit gave him five pounds and told him he'd just received it that

morning. But Charlatan wondered. And the more he wondered the more he tended to wonder.

"What," said Charlatan, with all the moral fervour at his command, "about the Others?"

"Others? Oh, them. They'll have some cash when we meet up with them," Picklewit said. "If ever. In the meantime they seem to be getting along very well by swindling the various inhabitants of their localities. Snagg worries me, though, I must admit. If he were to sell the pantechnicon we'd be in the soup. There's valuable equipment aboard. We might need those webbing rifles when it comes to the show-down."

Charlatan found all this very disturbing. Very disconcerting. It made him uneasy. And the more uneasy he became the uncasier he seemed to himself to be. Which made him uncasier still. Finally, he became extremely uneasy.

Picklewit noticed this. "Charlatan," he said. "You're uneasy. I advise a change of pants. Are you in love with Hilda?"

Charlatan blushed hotly. "Poor little Miss Houri," he said. "I think we should sack Brute, Picklewit. He lowers the whole Tone of the Movement."

"True. If Hilda pines away any more we'll have the skunk throttled. But there's only one way to restore the girl's tissues. You and I have got to make love to her, Char. an. She must get some other interest in life than Brute. It is up to us. It is a matter of humanitarian idealism. Unless we fill her life with new interests she will fade into a mere wisp of—er—some mysterious substance I haven't yet managed to understand the ins and outs of."

"But Picklewit," said Charlatan, "one can't bring oneself to trifle with a girl's affections."

"Never mind about her affections, give her a pinch," Picklewit said. "I'm starting a campaign of it right away. And see that you join in in the right spirit. We've got to be unselfish. This is no time for mimsy morals. There are occasions on which bourgeois morality must be sacrificed for Good Itself. Snap into it, Charlatan, I rely on you."

And so it came about that one evening Mr. Charlatan invited Miss Hourì to accompany him for a short stroll. The poor sad girl listlessly consented—she left all her lists in the briefcase beside her bed. They walked nippety-clack along the road towards the bridge over the River Zed, which of course is the next one down the coast from the Exe and the Wye. Charlatan glawped down at the sluggish oozy water and (murmured) “Oh hildA, my” (THIS) straightening his AVERSIONS tie “Nò, well” IF

this way

that

WAy

COMing*

I have wondered whether you and I haven't a good deal in common. I too was disappointed in love.” Charlatan twitched uncertainly, and glanced askance at the sorrowful young damsel.

“Oh,” Miss Hourì drumpily replied.

“The girl's name,” said Charlatan, “was Crotchét. Mivelda Crotchét. She was poetry reviewer for the *Newspersion and Insinuation*. Very severe on flowers, myths and moons I remember. I once wrote a Vacuist poem and asked her for her views on it. ‘There's nothing in it,’ she said. ‘Well naturally,’ I said, a bit indignant, ‘that's the idea.’ She made rather a prissy face and advised me to join the Labour Party. I told her somewhat sharply that I disagreed with their education policy and she stunned me with a look. We never again exchanged words. And I had never even pinched her once.” Charlatan coughed. “Like this,” and with a sudden nervous and spasmodic twitch gave Hilda a pretty rousing one on the leg.

She squealed briefly and burst into tears.

“Oh dear dear me,” Charlatan said, and, enclosing her in his arms, tried to comfort her by whistling “Baby, baby, on the treetop” or whatever it's called.

“Oh, Mr. Charlatan, I'm so unhappy,” Hilda moaned.

“There there, there there, there there,” croodled Charlatan.

* A dash of old-fashioned experimental writing for the BOYs.

"Yes I am. It's not only Quintus who has been so—so—so CRUTAL and BRUEL to me, it's Mr. Picklewit too. He frightens me, Mr. Charlatan."

"Picklewit? Frightens you? Good heavens!"

"Yes, he pinches me. Quintus pinched me too, of course, and you pinched me just now, in the very same place and it *hurts*, besides being dangerous but that's not all. Quintus did it because he liked doing it, Mr. Charlatan, but there's something so cold and scientific and sort of kind of terrifying and probing about Mr. Picklewit's pinches, almost as if he *knows* something! But he can't know anything, can he, Mr. Charlatan, tell me he can't?" She lifted huge tear-drowned eyes to his, in star-lit beauty beside the tin-can infested water and the soggy-rooted trees.

Charlatan imagined he knew why Picklewit's pinches were so keen and hard and without affection. The man was simply doing what he Conceived to be his Duty. "Picklewit often seems stern but he has a kind heart," he assured Hilda.

"I wish he didn't seem to be *experimenting* on me, as if I were chemicals or something," Hilda wailed. "And then when Quintus comes back how shall I face him?"

Charlatan's passionate sympathy was aroused, like that of some dark-eyed character in *Daniel Deronda*, and he held her hand with the simplicity of a child, though of course he was nothing of the kind.

"Ahhhhh," breathed Hilda—a good job, we mean to say, or that would have been the end of the poor young elephant, "I feel so much better now. You are very generous and *tender*, Mr. Charlatan." She snuggled up against him, and he felt he was holding some delicious young mattress made of sorbo rubber.

"I promise not to pinch you again," he said with due solemnity, and the, meandered back to the hotel through a lemon wash of moonlight.

When Charlatan entered their bedroom Picklewit popped out from behind the door. "Good s. ff, Charlatan," he said. "Keep it up. Pitch it strong."

"I hope you don't imagine," said Charlatan with dignity,

"that any feelings I may have towards Miss Houri are not sincere."

"I never imagine things," Picklewit shouted cheerfully and sprang into bed. . . .

The following morning he still seemed bright and zippy. "We're going to Break New Ground," he announced to Charlatan, Dean and Hilda over breakfast. "Why not investigate industry, for instance? Is there a webbing factory around these parts, I wonder?"

Dean shook his head gloomily. "Webbing famine in Salop," he said.

Charlatan, sending Hilda, a slow, slushy glance, said earnestly: "Hilda and I will find out all about the local industrial nexus, won't we, Miss Houri?"

"Oh yes, that's right, I'm sure," simpered Hilda.

Charlatan was at once filled with a certain industrial-investigatory zeal and dictated memos to Miss Houri while holding Hilda's dear little hand (the left one, so that she could jot down rubbish in shorty with her right). They compiled lists, collected data, studied Trade Directories and pored tea over maps. Picklewit showed no interest in these preliminaries and soon grew impatient. "Come on, Charlatan," he said, "the boots says there's a cheese factory down the road. Let's get going."

"But we can't just—"

Picklewit started walking.

"We can't simply go in and—"

Picklewit increased his pace.

"We can't barge into a—"

Eventually they arrived, Charlatan still protesting, Picklewit moving at a brisk canter.

"I want to see the Manager," Picklewit said through a jolly sliding window to a pretty little thing.

"Fat chance," said the pretty little thing, with a perky grin. "The Manager's out."

"Having coffee," said Picklewit.

"How did you guess?" snipped the girl pertly and took a wee sip of tea.

Picklewit flung himself into a basket chair in the waiting room. "That girl should be spanked," he said moodily.

But Charlatan was already dutifully perusing *The Cheese Trade Record* and *The Butter Gazette*. Picklewit yawned, stretched and yawned again. "Come on, Charlie," he said. "Waiting doesn't agree with me. Reminds me of the queue at the Labour Exchange. Let's take a look round."

"But—" said Charlatan, glancing up from an account of the new muzzle-loaded Gruyère-holing machine. Picklewit had gone. "Oh dear! Great Horps!" and similar ejaculations, ejaculated Charlatan, thinking: "He will do something Awful if I'm not there to restrain him. Unless he is found, Disaster May Befall us. And then what would Hilda do?" He blushed in confusion. "How my thoughts stray," he upbraided himself, unable to suppress a smile of rapture. Anyhow, off he popped in pursuit, like popcorn. He popped into a vast room filled with churns and cheeses packed in boxes but apparently empty of humankind. But no, stay! Lo, over there by the biggest packing case a man-husk lay fast asleep on a pile of shavings, and huddled by a blue-painted window a group of droops drank tea with the zeal and determination of men of honour. Charlatan drew himself up. No one took any notice so he let himself down again. But this was cowardice! He drew himself up once more. "Fellow-workers!" he shrilled.

"What do you mean, fellow-workers?" shouted an uncouth churn-operative. "What work do you do besides drawing yourself up and letting yourself down again?"

Undeterred Charlatan continued his speech as to the manner born. "Is drinking tea the way to restore the Cheese Industry to the maximum production and consequent record-breaking turnover recorded in the *Butter Gazette* of 1934?" He thought a moment and added: "The August issue?" Seeing the churn-operative raising a huge Stilton, and concluding that the old saw about discretion being the better part of valour had some sooth in it after all, Charlie trundled open a huge fireproof sliding door to reveal another room filled with machines, churns, healthy smells and more chaps drinking

tea. No Picklewit. It was after trundling open the fifth huge fireproof sliding door, knees knocking with exertion and brow dewed with sweat, that Charlatan came up with his quarry. Picklewit was burping and swigging tea with yet another group of jolly fellows who, it appeared, were reeling, writhing and throwing dice.

"Got any cash about you, Charlatan?" Picklewit said.

"No," sternly riposted his friend.

"Pity." Picklewit rose and waved a hand. "Well then I'll have to be pushing. Cheerio, blokes. Thanks for the flutter. I'll be seeing you when I've borrowed a bit more ready money."

They passed from the building with a fictitious nod to the pretty little thing. "Interesting business, cheese-making," Picklewit said.

"Scandalous," said Charlatan, "all that tea-drinking."

"Tea is jolly good with cheese," Picklewit said with airy tolerance. "Well that's a fine day's work. I'll shoot in a report to Sir Arnold and then we can forget industrial efficiency for a while. He'll be delighted." He penned a few lines in the Post Office about the splendid morale of the workers in cheese-factories, how dark and sturdy was their tea and how well they rolled dice and bunged it off to Sir Arnold. Judge of his surprise when on the morrow he received the following telegram: "Reverse report stop hard work in all factories immediately or dismissed stop don't ring again stop am off to Japan stop sausages despatched stop Springthorpe."

"Hmf," Picklewit said. "We'll reverse his report for him, all right. We'll show the old bastard what a backfire's like. Come on, Charlatan."

"Come along? I don't fellow my dear follow; where to, after all, I mean to say?"

"We're going to be instrumental in flooding the country with cheese," Picklewit replied. "It's a scandal that the British people should consume millions of gallons of tea brewed from Foreign Leaves, leaves which might have been

torn from the pages of books by such outlandish characters as Chouang Chou, Mr. Nehru, Lao Tse, the Om of Sung, or from such deleterious works as the Bhagavad Gita, the Aphorisms of Patanjali, and the writings of Mao Tse Tung or Edgar Snow. Instead of consuming such vile concoctions they should be golloping and gorging down hunks of home-made cheese-substitute composed of whale-oil, snoek-juice, soap, salt and mashed bone in equal parts. Let's go. At once. Immediately. Forthwith."

They returned to the factory at the double.

"Hello, Dumpling," Picklewit said to the pretty little thing, "Manager in?"

"Don't be daft!" said the pretty little thing, more pert and perky than ever. "It's tea-time." And she took a sippikin herself.

"Splendid," Picklewit said. "The coast is clear. Come on, Charlie."

One fire-door, two fire-doors, three fire-doors, five fire-doors (the fourth had been sent away to be dry-cleaned).

"Afternoon, boys," Picklewit said, with what Charlatan regarded as offensive, nay vulgar, familiarity. "Tea ready? I've got some more cash today. How about a game?" And to Charlatan's horror and rank disgust he drew from his pocket a pair of dice. The horror and rank disgust increased as the game proceeded. Picklewit kept losing such large sums. And where did he get the money from? How was it that a man who couldn't afford to pay anybody's wages or his own hotel-bills was able to lash out with five quid at a time for a bet? Then, suddenly, Picklewit began to win. In ten minutes he had won thirty pounds.

"Here," said a bloke named Trotter. "This aint decent. This isn't my idea of fun, it's not. I'm cleaned out as if by Liver Salts. What will the missis say?"

"Tell you what, then," Picklewit said. "I'll give you a chance to get the lot back. You and I will have a last roll, just the two of us. If you win I'll pay everyone back whatever he's lost, and if I win you boys will promise to double output for two solid days. How about it?"

"Output?" said Trotter. "What for? What are you, a nark?"

"It's the only way to annoy the Trade Union leaders," Picklewit explained. "They're so used to strikes it doesn't worry them any more."

"There's something in what you say," Trotter said. "O.K. I'm on." He winked broadly at his mates, his tongue pressed in a corner of his large cheek. Charlatan closed his orbs. The prospect of Picklewit losing all that money was too much for his delicate constitution. He feared that he might faint away. As it was he stood like a virgin at an orgy, shuddering soulfully and peeking through his eyelashes.

"Well I'm blotted and blasted to a turn," groaned Trotter. "He's won!"

"Naturally," Picklewit said, popping the dice back in his pocket.

"I don't mind working, not in a manner of speaking," said a bloke, "but we've been tricked."

"That's right," said another. "We can't just start off bunging out cheeses like that. We'll have to think about it a bit, first, like."

Charlatan regained his idealism at once, now the money was safe. "Doubled output! A most praiseworthy notion," he fluted. "But think about it! Really! Oughtn't you chaps to get on with your work at once, I mean, and turn out cheeses like—er—hot cakes?"

"Cheeses?" said Trotter, unable to believe his ears. "Don't be wet. Look, I'll let you in on a secret. This is a cheese factory, ennit?"

"Why, of course, to be sure," bleated Charlatan, bewildered, as he wildered well he might.

"O.K., then," said Trotter, winking like a tiddly. "Do we make cheeses, would you say, mate?"

"Why naturally you do," Charlatan said, giving, as our mighty allies would say, with his eyebrows.

"Why naturally your ballocks," replied the chap. "What sort of ruddy backsides do you take us for? We make a cheese now and again, why npt, there's no law against it, but we're

really making plastic footballs on the side, get me. We sell em at a good profit the firm don't know about. Got our own sales organisation, an all. Who says the workers can't run a business?"

"Good gracious," said Charlatan faintly, paling beneath his pallor. Picklewit dragged him away before he could say something so idealistic their lives would be in danger.

"I'll be able to let Sir Arnold have an even better report now," Picklewit said when they were outside. "He'll be delighted and encouraged, wouldn't you say Charlie, to know that as a result of our intervention the output of plastic footballs will rise sharply?"

"But Pickle," protested his friend. "How could you be so sure you would win, I mean to say, dash it all, what a risk, great hoops."

"Easy," Picklewit said. "No risk at all. I had two sets of dice. For the first twenty minutes we played with the proper pair and I lost. So I changed to the loaded lot and won."

Charlatan paled, quailed and almost wailed.

"By the way, I suppose you never noticed," Picklewit went on, "but Sir Arnold, who is meant to be in Japan, sent a very prompt reply to my first report on Cheesc-making. What do you think of that?"

Charlatan was in no fit state to think anything about it. He groaned.

"I think he's up to something too fishy for a dog's dinner," Picklewit said, "and I mean to find out what it is. Still, we did a fine day's work this time, and the old blighter will practically have to send us a slice of cash, I should think."

Judge then of his surprise when three days later the newspapers cried: "Culture Ghouls Wreck Cheese Effort"; "Strike in Cheesery: Picklewit and Charlatan Again?" It seemed that the Room Five boys had rattled up output in such a fashion that the management had insisted on all the other workers doing likewise; the whole factory had promptly gone on strike as a protest.

"Well well well," said Picklewit soberly and clicked his tongue a good deal, thus: *chck, chck, chck*. "There's more

in heaven and earth, Horatio, than was ever so forthed in your etcetera." With a gesture of irritation he seized the parcel of sausages, which had re-arrived once more, inserted a curt note saying: "A gift to the Nation from the Springthorpe Cultural Mission," and addressed the whole thing to the British Museum.

Charlatan took to his bed, feeling very very ill indeed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*In which we apply a stethoscope to the
Mighty Heart of England*

GILBERT PONCE ALWAYS knew which way the wind was blowing, in the metaphorical sense. A real wind would have sent him for cover faster than a jet-propelled lap-dog. He made stirring use of that statement of Picklewit's. "Once, when I was young and believed that a picture of two holes hung upside down looked better than a masterpiece by Sir Alfred Munnings, and would have preferred a daub of two heads muddled together with six eyes apiece to a glorious tribute to the loveliness of young innocent womanhood in all its pristine virginity, I was deluded by cynical men," he wrote, and proceeded to give a distorted account of the Vacuist movement, explaining how sinister Charlatan, brutal Picklewit and deadly Dean had suborned an innocent young poetaster who longed for Beauty and Grace, and almost—but not quite—succeeded in making something un-British out of him—a communistic monster who saw things not as Right-Minded people saw them. "I'm not a brave man," Gilbert wrote. "No, I'm not a hero. It was not courage which drove me to do what I did. It was a sense of loyalty to British hearts which beat like mine. The opportunity was given me by Providence. I'm not a religious crank, but this I cannot doubt. These men knew me; they would seek my help; I could take the chance of penetrating their secrets and exposing their trickery to my public, to the Britain I loved, or I could turn my back and never raise my head again. What

could I do? What would any decent man have done? I took the risk. Did I venture my life? I suppose I did. Those men would stop at nothing. I know them. I have lived with them. I have heard them talk. I have listened to their confidences. Those men would stop at *nothing*. It was not easy to worm my way into their good books. I had to pretend to terrible beliefs, awful thoughts, fearsome follies. Had I not felt that you, my friends, were behind me I could not have done it. But I am glad that I did what I did. For now I can reveal to you what goes on behind those glaring headlines The Sausage Scandal, the Cheese Mutiny, the Porridge Scare. . . .” He insured himself against unpopularity in high quarters by stating his conviction that these clever crooks had talked the innocent unworldly art-lover Sir Arnold Springthorpe into allowing them to organise his Mission, and had set out from the first to divert it from its original laudable purpose and legitimate function. Gilbert really went to town, in a high-flown, flocculent style which the *Daily Peek* permitted as a contrast to its usual staccato utterance only when Denouncing Vice and Corruption.

And G. Ponce Esquire wasn't the only citizen who feasted spiritually at the metaphorical expense of our theoretical Heroes. Take Sir Baldron Withers, for example. Yerss. According to Hansard Sir Baldron, in a debate on the Adjournment, delivered himself of this harangue :

“Once again I feel it incumbent upon me to draw the attention of this House to certain events which are bringing our great country and its people into disrepute and are making of them a laughing-stock before the comity of nations. The facts I laid before the House on a previous occasion remain not only undisputed but, I venture to say, indisputable. Certainly they have been unchallenged. To my deepest regret I now find that they, disturbing as they may have been, were but the prologue to further incidents remarkable only for their impertinence, fatuousness and bad taste.

“I refer, of course,* to the organisation which calls itself the Sociological and Statistical Investigation into the Organic

* Sir Baldron's syntax is the envy of the civilised world.

Entropy of British Survival Values. Alarming as it is, this investigation is being financed from the public purse. It stalks abroad with the official backing of the Home Office. It is actually directed and encouraged by a Department within the Home Office, under the leadership of one Sir Arnold Springthorpe, a gentleman, I learn from this morning's paper—I cannot say with any appreciable surprise—who has betaken himself to the other end of the world where he presumably believes that the anger of the British people will be unable to reach him. So much for him. I will say nothing further on this point except to add that if in the near future the Minister concerned decides to wake from the deep sleep in which he has buried himself and so far exerts himself as to recall one who has injured England's fair name, I will offer myself willingly—I repeat, willingly—in the capacity of agent to bring this malefactor back to these dear shores." (Cries of "Hear, hear," "Good old Baldron," and "Lay into em".)

"I have asked, and have received no satisfactory answer, what this organisation purports to do. I am brushed aside with words, a deluge of words, some of them utterly alien and barbaric to my ears and, I venture to say, not only to mine but to those of all right-minded people. I am referred to something called" (consulting a piece of paper) "Entropy. What this is I cannot imagine. Presumably something from the French." (Laughter.) "Possibly one of those so-called foods which line the back shelves of grocers' shops, unsold, unwanted." (Shrieks of laughter.) "Or even, as I think most sane, common-sensible people will agree, a piece of plain—or should I say varnished—" (howls and gales of laughter) "balderdash by which certain sections of the population seek to blind us to our real enemy and cause us to deny our birthright." (Cheers.) "But—and I see the honourable member for Blackstown looking sheepishly at his order paper—it will take more than words to cheat me—aye, and thousands like me!—of my birthright." (Several members faint.)

* Quintus Brute's statistical survey on the subject has established that there are in fact 25,615 like Sir Baldron Withers.

"Today, however, I am happy to say that the evidence I possess is sufficient to put an end to this degraded and disturbing farce once and, I venture to say, for all. On the previous occasion when I spoke I could point to the possibility of corruption—not to corruption itself. I warned the House—I deemed it my sacred duty to warn the House—of incipient roguery. I could not denounce in detail and prove in extenso such roguery as I had every reason to suspect in fact existed. I drew the attention of members to evil men in our midst—not of overt criminals. It pains me that individuals calling themselves English—if they called themselves Scottish it would be quite another matter" (uproarious guffaws) "should even allow the thought that all was not well with their fair realm to enter their minds; I was hurt to think" (a shout of "Good!") "I repeat, I was hurt to think, and I am even more hurt to observe that there is a member of this illustrious Mother of Parliaments who can so far forget himself as to utter vulgar cries which can only lead one to suppose that he has sympathy with the criminal scoundrels it is my pleasure, nay, my duty, to unmask. Er, where was I?" (Shout of "You were hurt to think.") "Oh, er, yes, I was hurt to think that a band of clowns should imagine they could lead a people so eminently sensible as the British people to what they choose to call rejuvenation; it troubled me that imbeciles should set up as exemplars and that" (thumping the despatch box)* "we should allow it! But these are mists, miasmas, vague suppositions compared to the actual proof of atrocity that I now possess with regard to at least one member of this—this obnoxious crew of vermin." (Prolonged roars, boos, hoots and cheering whoops.) "I repeat, this obnoxious crew of vermin." (Cries of "Withdraw.")

"If certain honourable gentlemen will cease to indicate themselves afraid of what I am about to say" (calls of "Afraid! Withdraw! Withdraw!")—"yes, I repeat, afraid, I will be able to lay the facts before the House. Let them answer the

* He had to walk the whole length of the Chamber to do this and then back again to continue. Naturally, we know our House of Commons. If we're not M.P.s, it's your fault, not ours.

facts instead of seeking to drown the words of the man bold enough to reveal them to the nation. Those facts are these. At Maidenhead, just over a week ago, a young female calculating machine arrived to spend a well-earned weekend on the river. She is a charming machine, beautifully manufactured, well-balanced, well-educated, of good family—her father is an electronic brain from Manchester and her mother is an atomic pile, one of the Buckinghamshire atomic piles to be precise—and extremely capable at her job. This innocent young implement had hardly arrived in the town before she was accosted by a vile creature called Brute. At first his attentions were repulsed—but, honourable members, I beg you to recall the machine's youth and innocence and her defencelessness against the wiles of this seasoned philanderer. For, this brute, this Brute, this brute Brute" (cheers, laughter, yarools) "is, according to information at my disposal, a professional statistician, and well able therefore to discover means of insinuating himself into the confidence of an inexperienced calculating machine. But the whole affair is so distressing to me that I hope you will allow me to draw a veil over the rest of the sad, unfortunate business. I will merely say the demon had his way and then withdrew, as is the custom of the species. But this is not all, gentlemen, though if it were all, it would in all conscience be bad enough. It is *not* all. There has been issue of this disastrous connection—two baby typewriters have been born to the unhappy machine. She herself, I am glad to say, is back with her family and receiving excellent attention and loving care. The parents are, naturally, distressed, infuriated, and cry out for justice. They demand reparation. I believe they should have reparation. Indeed, I shall be very surprised if this House does not immediately insist that they **MUST HAVE** reparation. I think the form which reparation should take is obvious enough to you all.

"For this man—no, no, a misnomer—this demon, this brute, is actually a member of the organisation to which I have already referred. You may say that he himself will be sufficiently punished. Everywhere he goes he is followed by two tiny typewriters, squealing for oil. If he has feelings,

which I beg leave to doubt, they will surely be pricked and pinched by the inarticulate accusations of his progeny; at every phase of his passage through life he will be denounced by the evidence of his bestiality.

"So much for the man Brute. But we owe more, much more, to this unhappy family and indeed to our unhappy country, before we can stand upright once again with clean hands before the Tribunal of Posterity, and vote ourselves an increase in salary. This organisation, I say, this dastardly gang, this nest of cantankerous criminal offscourings, this" (shouts moos, bleats, miaows, barks, groans) "this—let me speak, I shall not give way, please allow me to say what it is my sacred duty to utter though it cause me no matter what degree of hardship and denigration—this deadly and smirching gang of degraded cut-throats, must be extirpated, throttled without delay, swept off the fair face of our motherland. Government support must be withdrawn *in nolle statistando*. Let the Home Secretary dare to stand up and suggest otherwise—ah, but I see he is no longer with us. I do not blame him. No one likes to face the censure of righteous eyes. Let his assistant, his minion, shall I say his stooge" (whirlwinds of applause and laughter) "stand up and suggest so on his behalf. He dare not. For public money must on no account be squandered on this disgraceful project. At this very moment a pantechicon is roaming Britain with the express purpose of giving publicity to this heresy. Some at least of the personnel must stand trial. Let me put before you the names of those who are already enrolled in this shocking project, in the ranks of those who would smear the name of Britain. They are names not unknown, I venture to suggest, to our suffering community. Direction is in the hands of Picklewit and Charlatan. Picklewit, the diseased brain behind the gagging of the Mayor of Mottleton's secretary; the demagogue who despatched his minions to disrupt a football match; the malefactor who caused a riot in a cheese factory, and, if I can believe my eyes, the nihilist responsible for the following statement recorded in the *Daily Peek*: 'This country'—I quote from this—this desperado's own statement—'This

country is run by a gang of doddering dunderheaded Communist traitors in the pay of the Handonose League and my job is plain. I'm entrusted with the task of expelling the lot of them.' I ask you gentlemen, I ask you very confidentially, gentlemen, I ask you very confidentially" (shout of "Ain't she sweet"). "This is no time for levity. Whoever dares to treat this sober, serious and massively important subject with less than the monumental sincerity it deserves must be deemed unfit to sit as member in this House." (Cries of "Withdraw! Shame! Good old Baldy! Pitch it strong!") "I ask you with deep sobriety, gentlemen, have you ever in your lives as public men encountered a more impertinent, revolting, insolent, disgusting statement, even from the Honourable Members for—" (jeers, cheers, calls for beers). "No, I say, impossible. Not from Hitler, not from Genghis Khan. Then there is Charlatan, the sly machiavellian counsellor who persuaded the renegade librarian Päperjacket to steal a copy of Kon-Tiki from the Norwich Public Library, and then wantonly destroyed it. The madman Dean, who nearly stifled Buckingham Palace in swathes of webbing, who was imprisoned for the safety of the realm, and who is now again at liberty to the extreme danger of all that we in this country hold dear. Stodge, the so-called sculptor—and what more conclusive evidence could be required of the sink of iniquity into which the craze for so-called modern so-called art must inevitably plunge us than the lunatic practices of this—this mountebank! A man who insults government by modelling Town Councillors in porridge, who mocks at the stability of our institutions by creating statues which distintegrate the moment they are unveiled. I should like to be able to lighten this gloomy picture, but alas I am unable. You have already heard the story of the odious Brute. In the career of Dennis Tripod we see the poison eating into one whom we know to be essentially decent. There are many among us who will remember Dennis Tripod as a national hero, a type of healthy British manhood. We well recall that glorious innings played by him for I Zingari against the Australians in 1927, when he stayed in all day without scoring and even at the close of play refused to

leave the wicket. That *was* Tripod. Today Tripod is a man who insults us daily with upside-down photographs.

"Need I go on? I see by your faces that I need not. I demand the instant closure of this evil covey and the arrest of the leading characters. Let them stand trial before the conscience of the British nation and let the poison be cut out of our system before it is too late."

(Cheers, applause, catcalls, shouts of "Rub it in, Resign, Bravo, Good old Withers.") The House divided but it was discovered there wasn't a quorum. Charlatan and Picklewit had gained a temporary reprieve.

But the following day Mr. Sniggerley Bevels devoted his "I Maintain" column in *Woman's Wonder* to an attack on Our Heroes.

"As I lay in my deck-chair," he wrote, "with the sun slanting through the trees in honey-gold rays, I wondered to myself, 'who at this moment is the man for whom the women of Britain have the intensest admiration?'"

"As though in answer a thrush chirruped in my ear: Sir Baldron Withers.

"Surely no one has captured the imagination of British womanhood so completely in recent years as this fine old Warrior of Westminster.

"While Sir Baldron is alive and in good health we may still feel our beds are safe places to sleep in. Nor do I maintain that our nation is so lacking in the spirit that overcame the Boers and won the admiration of the world on Coronation Day that Sir Baldron stands alone.

"Sad would it be if Sir Baldron lacked henchmen. He does not. There is Mr. Gilbert Ponce, the fearless columnist of that admirable daily paper, the *Peek*, who only recently revealed to the world what many had guessed but few had dared to utter.

"There is also Miss Anemone Stingray. I especially wish to call your attention to Miss Stingray. She is secretary to the Women's Institute at Nether Millstone in Northamptonshire. What has Miss Stingray, a humble secretary, one of thousands up and down the country, common people serving with all the thoroughness and self-sacrifice that life in its bustle and hustle

leaves so ill-rewarded and to which the eyes of the great world so rarely pay admiring tribute, what has Miss Anemone Stingray done to deserve mention in this column, you may ask? I reply, Miss Stingray is a very remarkable woman who is content to use her great gifts in a lowly avocation.

"Therein, I maintain, lies the greatness of our people—Little People who are Big People.

"I have received a letter from Miss Stingray. It is brief, to the point, outspoken and *true*. It is the truth of Miss Stingray's allegations that make it essential for me to bring them to your notice.

"Miss Stingray writes (with obvious emotion) that arrangements had been made for the village fête at Nether Millstone to be televised. A simple glimpse of Old England—nothing pretentious, nothing *futuristic* (as Miss Stingray herself says). Bowling for a pig, an obstacle race, fine old heart-warming traditional pastimes.

"None of these things were seen. Instead, viewers had the shameful experience of watching masses of webbing writhing across the screen. Yes, you are right! The madman Dean again.

"In no country but our own would a man with his abominable record be allowed his liberty. He should be shut up in Dartmoor. I maintain this fearlessly, conscious of speaking up for the simple people of the land. But like attracts like, and on this occasion he was assisted by the anarchists Charlatan and Picklewit. (An anarchist is a man who seeks to fulfil his policy by murder, rape and arson.)

"But let me quote Miss Stingray's own fine words: 'It is monstrous that the B.B.C. should assist in this insult to the nation. But surely these vultures have at last overstepped the mark. They stand condemned before all right-thinking, right-doing English men and women.

"'I had the misfortune to meet *them* (I will not sully my pen with their names) face to face. I felt I was looking into the eyes of criminals who would stop at nothing. One has the slimy, bestial face of a loathsome reptile; the other resembles a hyena searching hungrily for its prey.'

"Yes, Miss Stingray is right. These creatures, these monsters are a menace to our society. Heaven knows, there is much that could be improved in it—we are not so charitable, so loving as we should be to little doggies, to tender flowers and to the flocculent clouds which browse overhead. But though we may not be perfect we are at least honest, straightforward and unwilling to allow such blackguards to take root among us. We must oust them. These women must not be left to fight their battles alone.

"I draw your attention to the portraits below. Then I ask you to reread Miss Stingray's vivid description of their appearance. Remember that this was in a simple village public house in the heart of England.

"But hush! The thrush is singing again. Is it my imagination or is he really saying, 'Hats off to Miss Stingray'?"

"I maintain . . . THESE MEN MUST HANG."



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*In which a fine old English gentleman
is redeemed by cricket*

WE ADVISE SENSITIVE readers to close this book and ask the publishers for their money back. (The publishers will never get *their* money back, but there's no reason why you should bother with their troubles.) If a sensitive reader continues to honour us with his attention he will shortly become indignant and accuse the authors of "cynicism" or something of that kind. Most unjust. We are merely abject and cowardly realists, who daren't invent a word or an incident, dully and stupidly recording actual events in a Wet World. So if you're going to read any more keep your complaints to yourselves.

The point is that the Net was closing in. The End was near. Plots, plots, plots. Handonose, Withers, Bevels, Ponce—and where is Springthorpe? *Is* he in Japan? Since it would be pleasant to record that at least one of these dastardly plots against the Mission failed, we *will* record the failure of one such d.p. though its failure made not an iota of difference to anything so far as we can see.

Ponce, having corrupted Brute, now attempted to do the same with Tripod and succeeded in cornering that elusive kangaroo in a hotel at Brighton.* Chirping cheerily about delightful little Kodaks and Agfas Ponce whipped from his pocket a gorgeous Zeiss-ikon, with a glinting eye and a curly

* How did he do it? Easy. Tripod, though careful about fiends, was both a family man and a gentleman to boot, and always wrote to his wife every week, putting his present address at the top of each letter.

shutter. "She's a beaut, Mr. Tripod," he lisped. "A most agreeable child. I've never had a single complaint against her, not even from the crustiest and most exacting of my customers. Surely you can't resist her?"

At first Tripod had imagined Ponce to be attempting to sell him a camera for use in the proper manner, but when the full nature of Gilbert's intention came home to him the poor fellow almost fainted away. What caused him most distress was the fact that he could not avoid looking longingly at the lovely little creature. But Tripod was a man of honour. It was but the work of a moment with him to draw himself up to his full height by dragging at his collar and braces, to lean haughtily on his advanced shooting-stick and to utter icily the quelling words: "The answer, Sir, is in the negative!"

Ponce flicked an imaginery pimpernel from his coat with an immaculate scarlet plastic handkerchief, and giving a final suggestion of dismissive sangfroidly shruglet, he swayed nonchalantly from the room.

Tripod mopped his brow. "I have defied temptation," he told himself. "I shall continue to do so. But to what avail? What does life hold for me? Upside down photography, association with characters of dubious antecedents on the fringes of the underworld. . . . A continual dash about the country in a fruitless, yea, a fruitless effort to avoid the invincible and terrible Fiends of Probability. Ah, the loneliness, the loneliness!" He played a moody back defensive stroke to an imaginary inswinger.

A tall man clad from head to foot in moustache and eyebrows, had been watching him with bright blue eyes above the sports page of *The Times*. He now rose with a low, passionate yet Etonian cry and strode vigorously towards Tripod like a man spying an unattended double whisky. "Tripod!" he cried, "Tripod, by all that's holy!"

Tripod blinked as though he had just been confronted with a fast, good-length googly, and then: "Buchan Hannay!" he cried. "Buchan Hannay, by all that's holy!"

They gripped hands firmly, two men who knew the formula.

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"This meeting's providential, Tripod," Hannay confessed. "Providential, old man, and you know I don't use words like that lightly. The Old Stagers are here for the May festival, you know, we're down to play the Youngsters, to show the younger generation that cricket *was* cricket when *we* were in our prime, eh, old man? Well, everything was nicely set for a good solid drawn game and now poor old Blither Muckspread, the best defensive number seven in ten counties has gone and got a bad go of the old complaint. . . . Look here, old chap, I know it's a lot to ask, you've been out of the game for some time, and all that, but I wonder if just conceivably you would accept an offer to step into the breach, Tripod. For the honour of the old firm, you know, what, to demonstrate to these young spivs, zootsuiters, longhairs and drape-coated car salesmen that cricket's not yet as dead as poor old 'Dodo' Sprockett. He sank with all hands just last year, poor old Dodo. No man ever bowled more balls wide of the leg stump than good old, loyal old Dodo. Still, that's how it goes, that's how it goes. Well, what do you say, Tripod? What do you say, old man? Come, you simply can't refuse."

Tripod's sad eyes filled slowly with tears. He blinked them back and swallowed an egg of emotion. "Ah, Buchan, forgive this unmanly display of feeling," he said, brokenly. "It's most kind of you to ask, but it's no use, old man, I'm gonner, nothing but a soul lost to decency, a broken-down waster, I've sunk too low since those brave days of the twenties to venture on to a field with gentlemen again."

"Yes, yes, I understand, culture, photography, yes yes, I know how you feel, Tripod, my dear chap, a lot of unfortunate publicity, too, but I said to Farmingham Stott when I read that distressing report about your association with this—er—gang, that you were a good man misled; you're not a rotter, Tripod, no man dare say you are when I'm about. Great Scott, no! That's all done with now, my dear chap, we'll see to that. Think no more about it. I don't hold a man's shortcomings against him, Tripod, so long as he tries to overcome them, tries to stick to the old code, so long

as he's prepared to stand by a good cause when he meets it. And what better cause than this? You're needed, old man, you're needed. You can show the Empire's not going under far better by drawing with these young litter-louts at cricket than by rampaging round the country in a pantechnicon with a lot of hooligans. Why, a game of cricket will make a new man of you, Tripod, you mark my words."

Tripod sighed. "You may be right, Buchan, I feel that you may be right. Once in my flannels, with my hair cut, out there in the middle again with splendid fellows who know a crude cover-drive from a sterling civilised back defensive shot, perhaps the memories of these last dreadful years of degradation and despair will flee away and I shall no longer be a mere upside-down photographer associating *faute de mieux* with riff-raff and pursued from pillar to post by perverted Fiends but—blessed words—a True Blue Cricketer once more."

They clasped hands silently, with set jaws and twitching eyebrows.

"But there's something I must say," Tripod went on sadly. "And it will probably make you change your mind and withdraw your generous offer, Buchan. . . ."

"Nonsense, nonsense, my dear fellow. No need to apologise. Naturally you're out of practice," Buchan Hannay said bluffly. "But we'll give you an hour or two in the nets with Ludlow Lockjaw and Prenders Dockweed, you'll soon be right as rain, putting the solid straight barndoor to everything."

"That's just it, that's the awful truth I have to face," Tripod said. "It is the very reason I gave up cricket. My back defensive stroke is suspect, Buchan. I began scoring runs with it!"

"Runs!" said Buchan Hannay, shaken, profoundly shaken. "But you can overcome that, Tripod, surely. Face up to it like a man and you'll soon be restored to proper form."

"I am not fit for it," Tripod said sternly. "I judge myself and find myself wanting. I know that cricket is not merely

a game, Buchan, but a discipline, a way of life, a dedication. He whose heart is not pure may play a lofted drive or a pull stroke but he cannot stay in all day without scoring a run. No, there will always be the danger of getting a boundary off the edge. If I played I should be forced by my own consciousness of unworthiness to attack the bowling."

"Attack the bowling!" Buchan Hannay paled beneath his tan. "But my dear fellow, that shows the delicacy of your sentiments, and I'm not going to desert a man who still understands the true traditions of our national game. No. You shall play. And if you must attack the bowling, then you must. We will stand by you."

"Buchan, my friend," Tripod said, his voice wavering with repressed joy, "how can I thank you. If only I had had the courage to confess when first I saw the signs of approaching dissolution I might never have fallen to my present state. You are a gentleman, a gentleman of the old school."

They clasped hands silently.

We won't describe the game in detail. Suffice it to say that there was a good deal of bowling, batting and fielding, and that all the other Old Stagers behaved with meticulous courtesy and correctitude, offering to bowling of every kind rigidly defensive backstrokes or forward defensive prods. If the ball glanced off a bat-edge they stoically refused to run. The youngsters never moved *their* bats at all but remained rooted in their creases like hair-raised trees. Tripod, on the other hand, essayed one defensive backstroke in the old classic nonpareil manner which had made him the hero of his day. Alas, his eye was not so sure, his hands not so steady, his wrists not so pliable as of old. The ball flashed over slip's head to the boundary. Tripod blushed fiercely and giving himself up for lost, assaulted the bowling with the lack of delicacy of some crude wasteland cricketer. Receiving in all twelve balls he hit eleven of them for six.

"Never mind, old chap," Buchan Hannay said bluffly, keeping a stiff upper lip. "You did your best."

"I'm truly sorry, Buchan," Tripod said in a subdued tone, laying down his bat. "I'm bitterly disappointed. Admit it,

I won the game for you, old man—I can't say how ashamed I feel to have done anything so—so undignified."

"Come, come, don't feel so cut up; say no more about it," Buchan Hannay replied with a bravely wooden smile. "Naturally we should have preferred to achieve a draw but it's all in the game, old man, it's all in the game." He gave poor Tripod a comforting pat on the back. "Now look here, old fellow, I've been thinking about you a good deal, and I don't like to see a fellow of your breeding and background involved in—in—trumpery nonsense of the kind this—this *Mission* thing gets into. A fellow of your calibre going to seed—no, no, I can't have it, Tripod, we must do something to save you."

Tripod shook his bowed head. "I know, I know," he murmured.

"Well then, I've decided to make you an offer," Buchan Hannay said. "I can't suggest anything princely, you know, nothing like pre-war, nothing of the kind you were used to in the old days, you understand, but at least it'll be a cut above culture, photography and—and—those Charlywit people."

"Please! Please!" Tripod held up a quivering hand. "Don't mention their names. Don't recall that nightmare to me. It's too bitter, too bitter."

Buchan Hannay gruffed sympathetically. "Of course, of course, old fellow, say no more about it. But if you would be willing to consider a little post as assistant groundsman at Blocker's Park I'd be proud—yes, proud—to have you."

Tripod swayed where he stood. By a deft use of his shooting-stick he prevented himself from falling. "I can't say, I simply can't express to you how grateful, how deeply grateful I am, old friend," he whispered at last.

Buchan Hannay, old soldier though he was (or at least pretended to be; actually he was a retired grocer), had to turn away. "Say no more about it, old man," he mumbled gruffly.

And so it came about that DENNIS TRIPOD deserted the Springthorpe Cultural Mission.

Next to go was QUINTUS BRUTE.

He didn't return to the Mission in search of Hilda. No.

Hilda was only Woman, to be pinched when available, to be forgotten when beyond pinching distance. Brute had wide tastes and could, as has been demonstrated, make do with a calculating machine or even with a charming fish. What drove him towards Picklewit and Charlatan was simply Lack of Funds. You may think it strange, odd, bizarre that an intelligent statistical bounder like Brute should view Picklewit and Charlatan as a possible source of cash, but the fact is, Brute Knew Something. He had already called at Sir Arnold Springthorpe's office, in an effort to tap the fountain-head, as it were. But there a cold and clearly unpinchable secretary had informed him with a look at once metallic and clammy: "Sir Arnold is in Japan. He wishes it to be clearly understood that Mr. Picklewit is solely responsible, both legally and morally, for the payment of wages in connection with the Cultural Mission. A large sum of money was recently despatched to him for that purpose. Here is Mr. Picklewit's present address. Good morning."

Brute's face swole with various emotions. He bumbled from the building like a rhinoceros in search of white hunters. It was a bit of a surprise to find a gawky monster at his elbow suddenly clipping out: "Nit in the hair of culture!" Before Brute could strike back, the insufferable Crampon Bite had disappeared.

Once on the way to Middersdike Crockage, the thought of Hilda recurred to Brute in the form of a vision. (Brute's thoughts always took the form of visions. Psychologists are working on it.) A juicy steaming steak lying on a plate, all ready for the fork. He was licking his lips and flexing his pinching fingers as he lumbered into the lounge of the Bowdler Arms Hotel—to discover Charlatan gripping Hilda's hand between a couple of his own and reciting poetry in a low, throbbing voice.

"Hilda!" cried Brute, his moral sense outraged.

Charlatan quivered like a long grass in a brisk east wind and jacked out of his box of tenderness with a low thrilling croak of rage and nervous debility. His eyes were aflame, his lips all akimbo. "You!" he bleated savagely. "You, you

dastard! You criminal skunk! You trifler with a woman's love! You renegade statistical fibbertigibbet!" (This particular piece of rhetoric sounded and felt like a detached portion of the Niagara Falls becoming airborne.) "You traitor to Vacuist concepts of the Good Life! I challenge you to a duel!" and he flung down his trousers as a challenge with a grandiloquent gesture.* Hilda screamed. Brute guffawed. Picklewit came in, thundering: "What the devil are you doing here, Brute?"

"I want my money," Quintus replied simply, never one to circumambulate mulberry bushes when a direct rude word would do the trick. "And besides what's the idea of this minus quantity manhandling Hilda?"

"No money's due to you," Picklewit said. "I've yet to see you do any work to earn it."

"Work?" Brute seemed markedly bewildered.

"Work," said Picklewit sternly. "Where are your statistical tables?"

"They've been turned," Brute rejoined with a coarse laugh.

Hilda gave a low moan of distress. "The shame!" she cried. "How could I ever have loved such a beast. Oh, to have sacrificed the good opinion of the NUNS for THAT!"

"A couple of good pinches would soon put you right," Brute shouted jovially, and was astounded when Charlatan, hindered as he was by his collapsed trousers, stumbled towards him over occasional tables, pouffes, hassocks and knocked his hat off. "Pinch her at your peril, you scoundrel!" he said.

Brute seized Charlatan by the throat, transferred his grip to the ears and was about to lead the poor fellow to the window when Picklewit said: "Just a minute, Brute. About this money. . . ."

Brute forgot Charlatan at once. "That's the stuff," he said. "Cough it up, old boy, and I'll be off."

"The fact is, you were sacked a fortnight ago. I sacked you. If you didn't get the letter it's too bad. Good-bye."

* Not really a change in Charlatan's character. Best attributed to the effects of passion on a sensitive nature.

Brute flapped an ear with his fingers in an effort to get the thing to record more acceptable information. "Say that again?" he said appealingly.

"You're sacked," said Picklewit obligingly.

Brute started forward with his mayhemistic intentions clearly inscribed upon his piggy features. Before he had advanced two yards Hilda, unable to restrain her thirst for vengeance, had run him through the rear with the long pin of her celtic brooch.

"Ooaouwlooaowooo!" yelled poor Quintus. "Hooaoulouloulou! Aroohoaou!" He pranced, curvetted, became antelopular, yodelling the while, leaping chairs, tables, settees with a vast gasconading abandon, inspired and levitated by a terrible anguish. "Bitch!" he yaowled. "Dirty anti-statistical shitbags, the lot of you! I'll sue you, I'll have the law on you. You wait! I'll go to Ponce. I've got plenty of dirt for him—he'll roast you, he'll pound you up. I'll make your ears burn. I'll——" But as Hilda lunged forward again with the pin advanced he gave a last wild ineffable skirl and sailed clean through the closed window into Croup Street, sending a cross-eyed ice-cream seller into hysterics and leaving the perfect outline of a porky form in glass.*

Charlatan, trousers still concertinaed about his ankles, was comforting Hilda by gently, tenderly, adoringly, decorously stroking her hair, but Hilda only sobbed: "Oh Quintus, Quintus, Qunts, Quonuts, what have I done," louder and louder and louder.

"Stop bleating, the pair of you," Picklewit snapped. "There are more important things than Stinky Brute to worry about. This telegram from Tripod." He waved angrily the flimsy slip which read: "Saved forgive apologies redeemed from fiends Buchan Hannay job as groundsman cricket oh cricket to return to thy bosom regenerate son no more upside-down photography the humiliation of it oh my little ones a new

* You think we're exaggerating? You weren't there, were you? Very well then. Try jumping through a window yourself and see what happens. To hell with science.

man please accept resignation keep my pay don't deserve any sincerely Tripod."

"The blithering ass," Picklewit said. "Him and his blasted back defensive strokes. The rats are leaving the sinking ship, and we haven't even got a ship. Where's Snagg? Where's that pantehnicon? What did the blackguard mean by sneaking off like that without a word to anyone?"

"But Picklewit, you sent him!" Charlatan said, turning for a moment from Hilda's tear-stained face.

"Who have we got left?" Picklewit went on. "Jonathan, who only cares about webbing, Stodge who only cares about porridge, Päperjacket who only cares about loost and the Gallup Pole who's vanished completely. We've got to find Snagg. The way things are shaping now we'll probably have to defend that pantehnicon to the last man."*

"Picklewit!" said Charlatan, rising with dignity from Hilda's knee. "I am surprised to hear you expressing such a cynical, defeatist point of view. How can you suggest in front of Hilda, who trusts and depends on us, that our work of spiritual rejuvenation may fail? The very idea! Brute's departure is a godsend, he was a menace, a clutter in the cultural soup. I'm disappointed in Tripod, his desertion is a sad blow, but it's only fair to say that the man always struck me as a little weak in the head, somewhat touched, a scrap obsessed, not entirely balanced or sound. As long as Hilda and Jonathan are with us and the brave Gallup Pole is burrowing underground on the track of our enemies, what have we to fear while our hearts are bold and strong?"

There came a titter from beyond the dim-varnished door and a voice fluted cruelly :

Brute and Tripod—fools are wise—

Don't you also feel a qualm?

Look deeply into Hilda's eyes—

And then pop-pop, Maa es salaam.

Why, at the words "pop pop" does Hilda blanch and tremble? Picklewit's expression becomes sour and lean.

"Hilda," he says, "my lump, my little roly-poly swiss cake of delight, you've been working hard to grow huge and sumptuous, haven't you, my lovely Yorkshire pudding?"

"Oh, Mr. Picklewit!" she sobs, her eyes wide with fear.

"Well, you're pneumatic and luxurious enough for anything now, my podgy fruit, and the time has come for you to justify your growth and save us from our enemies by proving once and for all that British Womanhood is Swelling. Defeat the Americans by showing that you have a Better Bust than Jane Russell's and a Better Bustle than Jane Rust's."

"Oh, Mr. Picklewit!" sobs Hilda.

"Picklewit! I demand that you leave poor little Hilda alone. She has been through a trying experience. Don't distress her in this heartless fashion."

"I wouldn't dream of distressing her," Picklewit said. "I'm simply saying that unless she agrees to co-operate in demonstrating the glory of British Womanhood I shall reveal her secret."

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" wailed Hilda woefully.

"Picklewit! Cease! Stop this villainy! What secret?" cried Charlatan.

"Never you mind, Charlie," Picklewit said. "I'll tell you what we're going to do. We'll organise a display, on universally approved lines, demonstrating the Right Attitude to Everything, and you can have a special Ideals Room all to yourself. It will be a British Cultural Fair, a Grand Exhibition, and Hilda will be the standard-bearer of British rejuvenation. This is her chance to show that British Women Are Growing Bigger."

"Oh Mr. Picklewit, you BEAST!" sobbed Hilda, louder than ever.

Picklewit approached her and she shrank away. Then with a gesture of surprising tenderness he stroked her bowed head. "It's not your fault, Hilda," he said. "You can't help reading advertisements, life being what it is. . . . Now, to business. I

* We've grown tired of the so-called historical present, which strikes us as the most irritating trick ever foisted on a gullible public.

want you to take hundreds of letters and litters to the *Daily Peek*, the *Global News* and every other rag in the country announcing this exhibition. We must hire a hall and send the bill to Sir Arnold. We shall have to advertise for Snagg, Päperjacket and Stodge, we'll need them. We'll promise to pay their wages. That should fetch them."

"But——" said Charlatan.

"I can pay," Picklewit said. "Or at least I can pay *some-one something*, which is all they deserve. There's that money I won in the cheese factory, though by rights it's mine to spend on buns. We'll get Jonathan busy on webbing exhibits. This is the climax of our joint career,* Charlatan, we must work other people's fingers to the bone."

"Picklewit," said Charlatan in an unwontedly dubious and thoughtful voice. "Are you—are you *serious* about this?"

"You don't mean to say," cried Picklewit, "that you're being cautious, prudent, circumspect and worldly-wise *now*, after thirty-two years of idealism?"

"Well," ventured Charlatan, "I seemed to detect a note of bitterness, of irony in your speech, a disturbing something, a suggestion of *je ne sais quoi*. . . ."

"Charlie," Picklewit assured his friend, "I was never more serious in my life."

"Then," said Charlatan simply, "I am with you to the end!"

They clasped hands silently, for all the world like D. Tripod and B. Hannay, except that neither was a gentleman.

* That's what he thinks. Wait till we let you know about their adventures in the Guavarague Cold War, and the Vacuist Theatre Movement.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*In which a black traitor
is unmasked*

THE NEXT TO desert was—No, we shall not spoil your fun by saying 'Too Much Too Soon. Read on, and discover the next victim of entropic decay.

Advertisements: "Wanted Joe Snagg, Wages Await Him, Binn's Hotel, W., Bring Pantechnicon, Picklewit" and Announcements: "Is Britain Decadent? Startling Exhibition, Suckers' Hall, W.C.2, by the Famous Springthorpe Cultural Mission" were blazoned in the Press. "Everyone is talking about the Suckers' Hall Feast of Art" . . . as *Vogue* would put it, riddled as it is with snobbery of every sort from intellectual to titular. Cartoons showed Picklewit and Charlatan on a platform, each holding up a string of sausages; editorials thundered and twittered. Comedians made the usual excruciatingly bad jokes on the wireless and received the usual tribute of maniacal yells of professionally sycophantic applause. Whisperers whispered, gossipers gossiped, ranters ranted, rhetoricians rhetoricised, theorists theorised, denouncers enunciated denunciations, announcers announced renunciations, bouncers threw Gilbert Ponce out of a night-club, Mr. T. S. Eliot gave a cocktail party, and went almost pale when it was revealed to him that his confidential clerk was really Cyril Connolly's mother, or was it Ezra Pounds's niece, we don't know, we weren't there.

In the meantime Charlatan lay delicately doggo in his little bee-bye-boes, Room 24, dreaming with all the innocence

at his command of Hilda's sublime beauty, her excruciating tenderness, her sympathetic heart, her sweet nature, her melting smile, her glorious tear-lucent eyes, her strange moods of disquieting coldness, her passionate embrace, her mysterious cries of "Quin," her ears, her nose, her . . . He woke suddenly, with a hollow sensation of uncase, as if the room contained three earwigs, two vast spiders, a bat and a ghoul. A board creaked in the corridor with a bodeful, dolorous sound. Charlatan cocked an ear, shivered and snuggled down again. Another board creaked, more briskly, with a sharp note of threat. A terrible vision blazed before Charlatan's inward eye. The Rape of Lucrece! Tarquin, the Ravisher! In other words, Picklewit, pyjama-clad, scientifically lustful, pinching fingers brutally poised, creeping towards the innocent, stainless, seamless Hilda's unsuspecting door. . . . Why had Picklewit stroked her hair? Why had he threatened her in mysterious, disquieting words? Why had he tormented her with ambiguous hints and assertions? The sadist! The perverted criminal! He was worse than Brute! Charlatan had always suspected something of the kind, but hitherto friendship had prevented him from admitting to himself the terrible truth. Besides, lack of money and opportunity had stopped Picklewit from indulging his odious tastes. Now, shaking with courage and jealousy, Charlatan, slowly, recklessly hesitated out of bed, scuffled, teeth chattering like a tea-party, until he found his warm cuddly woolly-lined slippers, donned his cosy dressing-gown, tied the comforting cord and crept into the corridor like the Form Weed forced by bullies to visit the school pantry at dead of night. He could hear Picklewit's vulgar, loathsome snoring in the next room. The cunning devil! There he was, lying like a log pretending to snore, when all the time he was really creeping along the passage like a wild beast stalking its prey, stealthily opening Hilda's door—There, another creak! Charlatan saw red, and advanced a shuffle or two. Another board creaked sharply. Charlatan stifled a cry and saw yellow. Hilda's door closed gently. Charlatan saw red again. He charged forward like a heavy Atlantic wave, surged open the door and flung on the

light. . . . Hilda sat bolt upright in bed, revealing magnificent snowy shoulders, her hair in disorder about her entrancing little face and her eyes goggling like immense headlamps. At the foot of the bed, hunched in threatening and sinister intentness, stood—THE GALLUP POLE! His thin lips quivered in a snarl, then squirmed to form a slow, difficult smile of welcome.

"Ah, Mr. Charlatan," said Scx ingratiatingly. "I come once more to your rescue, gallip, gallup, gallop. First I make a certainty that the lovely, precious Miss Houri is safe before I settle down myself like a faithful *hund* before her door."

Jealousy had sharpened Charlatan's senses and his wits to the point where he actually saw what was staring him in the face. He did not fail to note that faint sneering purity and idealism of the Pole's countenance. Charlatan was shocked, shaken, stricken, rocked, riven, horrified to the very barrow of his moans. For the first time it came home to him with sledgehammer force: This man is a foreigner! He covered his eyes with wambly hand. "O how are the noble fallen," he quavered.

"Silly things!" said Hilda suddenly. "Men! I hate them!" and she disappeared under the bedclothes so that only an appetising mound could be seen.

"You are in danger," the Pole said earnestly. "Ai of you, great possible scares. Dogging the footsteps of these pigs for weeks I know their foistless plans. Flee from here with all despatch. Handonose like strange creatures from the deep jungles beneath the sea creep forth at night to suck your containers like vampires suck the blood of maidens!"

Charlatan squealed briefly; then dignity returned. "If we must flee at once," he declared with complacent acumen, "what was the meaning of that remark of yours about faithful *hunds* before the door?"

A low whistle sounded from the street below. The Gallup Pole's face twitched, his eyes snapped, his nose beaked, his ears wiggled irritably, like a cow repelling flies. "Shut up, you miserable British tick!" he barked. Charlatan reeled

back, opening and shutting his mouth like a carp. "I'm having Hilda, you contemptible British scab. Stand in my way, you British pockmark and I cut off your eyebrows, loot your intestines and demolish your built-up area. Fool! *Idiot**! Schweinklunk! Stanilenko†! Do you think I would help the perfidious, crummy British to win at football! Dolt! Krautschwindler! Ngu gnu! Ha! For months I deceived you. So simple! How easy! Ha! Cretins! Ninnies! Submen! For months I passed on all your secrets to Handonose, and now the decisive hour has gestrucken." He pulled vigorously and abruptly at Hilda's blankets. Hilda rose with them like a sleepwalker, then sharply tugged them back. A fierce contest began, pull pull, tug tug, swaying this way and that, Hilda-Pole, Pole-Hilda, Hildapole, Polilda—

"Cad!" cried Charlatan, contributing what he thought a decisive utterance to the conflict.

The Pole's concentration was grim, and so was Hilda's. She seemed fanatically, desperately keen to keep her glorious form hidden from the eyes of men. This preoccupation prevented the combatants from observing the entry of Picklewit on all fours. He disappeared under the bed. A low clang signalised his arrival there.

Employing a smart judoistic gambit the Gallup Pole let go suddenly, Hilda fell back flump. Springing forward the Pole wrapped her like a cocoon in the blankets, hoisted her on his shoulders and made for the door at a stumbling canter. A hand snaked from beneath the bed and gripped the Pole's ankle. The slim black deceiver tippie-toppled—his precious bundle slumped forward and the heroic Charlatan flung himself down to cushion his beloved's crash into the floor's brutal embrace. Neighing, whinnying and kicking, the Pole caught himself a series of nasty cracks on the bed frame, and began clutching and rubbing himself like a mad masseur. This gave Picklewit time to scramble from under the bed and dunt him heavily with a flowered chamber-pot. With a wild, schizophrenic whinny the weird traitor bounded to his feet,

* This was said, of course, in French.

† A vile Russian insult.

galloped through the door clippety-clop and vanished into the night with a clatter of hooves.

"There's only one thing for it," Picklewit said, examining the chamber-pot for signs of damage, "we can't leave Hilda alone for a moment until the Great Culture Show is over. She is our symbol and they will make attempt after attempt after attempt to spirit her away. One of us must stay here the rest of the night."

Hilda's head blazed briefly from among the blankets. "Beast!" she cried. "The very idea."

"You can have me or Charlatan, take your choice," Picklewit said, "but you've got to have one of us. We can't take any more risks. Or if you like I'll get Jonathan instead."

"What, and all that webbing!" shrilled Hilda. "What would the NUNS say?"

Charlatan, crushed, squashed, bruised and winded as he was by Hilda's weight, as well as stabbed by grief at the Gallup Pole's desertion, could only utter a low, stricken "Murps."

"It had better be me, actually," Picklewit went on. "Charlie doesn't know the secret and it might upset him. But I don't mind giving you a cuddle for a few hours."

"What? Eh? How? Who? Oh!" squittered Charlatan, ghastly with dismay.

"Very well, Mr. Picklewit," Hilda said, suddenly submissive. "But you must promise to sleep on the floor."

"Hilda! You don't mean—? You can't mean—? You wouldn't—? In the same room—alone—with Picklewit!"

Picklewit sighed with disgust. "All right," he said. "Go and get a mattress, Charlie, and we'll *both* sleep here. What a fuss you all make. Anyone would think souls only used bodies as homes to keep their pure thoughts in."

When Charlatan had left the room he said in a low voice: "I understand you, Hilda, my lollipop, don't forget that. Quintus Brute isn't the only bounder in the world. . . ."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*In which there is an uproar
at Suckers' Hall*

A SLOWLY SURGING tumultuous mass of human detritus, a welter of sludge drained from the sump of London squashed through the outer gate, spread across the courtyard and began to squeeze, press, shoulder, shove, ooze and melt in a swaying, jostling mindless horde through the peeling portals into the Suckers' Hall, flowing on like lava through the Five Rooms of the Great Cultural Exhibition. Here and there among the anonymous mass gaped a fish-mouth we recognise, that of a Withers, a Bevels or a Ponce. And is that Quintus Brute at his tastefully-suited elbow? And Miss Stingray surrounded by her myriad flower-hatted troop? And Tripod, shooting-stick aloft, Hannay courteously kicking, gouging and remarking "Excuse me, Madam" by his side? Each individual was crushed in the doorway till his eyes came out on stalks, then popped forth into the body of the hall like a cork out of a bottle, thudding up against the webbing Enquiries Kiosk like a sack of dough, and being swallowed once more in the huge maw of this statistical leviathan. Within the kiosk Päper-jacket, Picklewit and Charlatan took it in turns to give stupid answers to stupid questions. At the far end of the Hall a beaming Stodge served the most varied refreshments at his Porridge Bar, providing stiff porridge, flabby porridge, liquid porridge, sticky porridge, lumpy porridge, smooth porridge, alcoholic porridge, aphrodisiac porridge, sporadic, deleterious and soporific porridge, laxative porridge, boiled, fried,

steamed, basted, roasted, kippered and frozen porridge, flavoured vanilla, chocolate, coffee, straw'berry, raspberry, garlic, tea, onion or ketchup to taste or not to taste, that is the question.

Snagg bouldered and slouched flat-footed about grumbling sixteen to the dozen as he oiled and repaired the clockwork which set Dean's marvellous and masterly webbing figures into motion, or reset the innumerable gramophones which granted them the miracle of speech. How they had worked, those loyal souls—Dean, Päperjacket, Snagg, Hilda, Charlatan and Stodge! Dean was convinced that this enormous display of realistic webbing constructs would demonstrate finally to the world the immense, overpowering stature of his genius as an artist and the caricatural nature of the figures would adequately express his fundamental contempt for representationalism as such. He had slaved to get the tableaux ready in time, fired on by inspirational zeal and bitter determination to assert and rehabilitate himself in the eyes of mankind, to dazzle Britain with the gay glory of liberated webbing. Snagg was motivated by more mundane considerations. Picklewit had given him the whole thirty pounds he had won in the cheese factory.

Snagg counted it carefully three times, gripping each note firmly and flicking it from between finger and thumb, then said in a heavy dragging tone: "Thirty measly q 1! It's a ruddy undred I want before I'm a day older."

"You're lucky to get a penny, you yeastless loafer," Picklewit said with that casual unpleasantness which so dismayed his idealistic friend. "You'll have the rest of the wages due to you when the Exhibition's over and not before."

"And you want me to make thousands of ruddy clockwork gadgets just for *wages*?" Joe growled. "Not on your bleeding life. I want a bonus for clockwork."

"Five quid each completed mechanism in full working order," Picklewit said.

Snagg pursed his lips, lipped his purse, then shook his great head like a punch-drunk boxer. "Don't believe it," he said in a slow, carping tone.

"Very well, then," said Picklewit with a brief laugh bright with arctic gaiety. "You're sacked and I confiscate the pantehnicon for the use of the Springthorpe Cultural Mission, to which it belongs by right."

"Come orf it," Snagg sneered. "Oo'd make the clockwork then?"

"Hilda's brother Studebaker," lied Picklewit coldly. "He's promised the lot for five quid apiece. Get your stuff out of that pantehnicon within the hour."

Snagg went pale, then pink, then red, then scarlet, then purple, then puce, then mauve and finally burst into huge, floudering sobs. "Take my p—p—pantehnicon," he blubbered. "You can't! It wouldn't be right, it wouldn't be decent! It'll break me eart."

"Another whimper out of you," rapped Picklewit, "and it's the last you'll sec of that old crate."

"Old crate! My pantehnicon an old crate. . . . You're a ruddy vandal, that's what you are, a roasting blasphemer, I'll have the law on you, I'll have—I'll—Five quid apiece, you said? O.K. Done."

And how Päperjacket had laboured in the Cause, once Charlatan had explained to him how his Ideals Room would contain representations of Chastity in all its forms and the whole exhibition would consist in effect of a ramified and complex denunciation of all the myriad manifestations of loost. His vast height enabled Päperjacket to lift into place with the ease of Tarzan lifting a lovely ape into his tree-top bed, figures which would otherwise have required cranes or hordes of women on step-ladders to erect. Charlatan and Hilda helped Stodge put up his Porridge Bar and then hung a ghastly selection of drab pictures and a vast array of United Nations flags in the Ideals Room.

Picklewit expended his stock of vital energy sitting in an armchair in shirt-sleeves and an eye-shield issuing a stream of instruction and comment.

Now the Show was in Full Flower. The mob fattened, thinned and fattened as it flushed through the cistern of the Exhibition from *Government and Law Room* to *Society*

and Education Room, through Art and Entertainment Room and Games Room to the Vacuist Room, thence out again into the Main Hall where they stared at the glowing, flowing Hilda, stuffed into a red, white and blue bathing-costume, the burgeoning symbol of radiant British Womanhood and National Rejuvenation, posing in a huge glass case holding a trident and wearing on her head a replica of Britannia's helmet. Every quarter of an hour the glass case was draped with webbing so that she could rest and drink a cup of tea brought her by the devoted Charlatan.

The Government and Law Room contained five webbing tableaux, the first consisting of a portly, porky, ponderous webbing Political Figure making rhapsodical though jerky clockwork gestures, as a gramophone turntable in his chest delivered over and over again the phrases "In the national interest," "the ship of state," "negotiation from strength" and "protective taxation," to a webbing Voter Figure who appeared to be indifferently filling in pool coupons. A webbing Churchman Figure was making the same clockwork gestures as he generously gave the Politician permission to use the hydrogen bomb, the atom bomb, the napalm bomb and germ warfare provided the enemy consisted of Foreigners, and took no notice at all of a little dark webbing Church-member Figure which continually gramphoned in a humble high-pitched voice such questions as: "Are Communists wicked or is only Communism wicked? If Communists are wicked are all Communists wicked or only some Communists? If they're not all wicked how can we be sure we kill the right ones? Or doesn't it matter? And are their wives wicked too? And are their babies wicked?" The needle kept getting stuck on the word "babies" and incessantly repeating "and are their babies, and are their babies" almost as if suggesting that babies are more important than mums and dads until Snagg blundered across and gave the Church-member Figure a kick to set his gramophone voice on its path again. This tableau was labelled *The Circle of Righteousness* and wasn't very popular. Several people said "Shocking," some "Insulting" and one "Porps." A lad booed, a cad spat, two vicars

twittered, a wit tittered and a woman named Letitia Smallweed slugged the voter figure with her handbag, but most simply sucked sweets, glawked or trundled indifferently by.

The second tableau was entitled *The Industrial Scene* and showed a webbing industrialist figure, clockwork whirring like a toy car as he twitched towards a burly webbing Trade Union figure and gramophoned "Tell em to go back to work." The Trade Union figure gramophoned in a voice bull-like with righteousness "Go back to work" at a webbing worker figure who obediently oiled the clockwork of both his masters with a huge webbing oilcan. Once Snagg's clockwork whirred in reverse and instead of oiling the bosses the worker figure swayed round and oiled a passing journalist who stormed the Enquiries Kiosk and demanded his money back.

"You moostn't loost after brass, lad," Päperjacket replied sternly. "Virtue's more valuable than mooney," lifted him like a pencil and dumped him outside among the clampering multitude, treading heavily on the poor fellow's pork-pie hat.

When Päperjacket got back to the kiosk a round-faced man bursting out in healthy colour hooted angrily: "I've inspected the whole show, every crook and nanny, and there's not a single exhibit devoted to Agriculture and Fisheries. I demand to know why British Agriculture should be so flagrantly neglected."

"Agricoolture, did you say?" Päperjacket raised monstrous eyebrows. "And Fisheries? You've got foony ideas of coolture, lad, that's as plain as the nose on your roobicoond face, that is. There's too mooch piscine loost in they fish, we couldn't have them swimming round the place spawning and that, could we? Just think of the way they lecherous salmon go leaping oop waterfalls ravenous wi loost. Ay, and as for agricoolture, we don't want farmyard ethics ere."

But the fellow kept circling the exhibition and coming back to the kiosk like a clockwork train, repeating the same question to Charlatan, who replied nervously: "Well, you know how it is, what with the webbing shortage, and labour difficulties being what they are, not to mention the confined floorspace and the lack of adequate equipment, it was deemed advisable,

though of course I mean to say the decision was naturally taken with considerable reluctance, it was deemed advisable to limit our tableaux to those subjects which could be treated with some approximation to completeness with the resources at our command."

"Porps," said the man, flicking his ears in a bewildered fashion like one listening to a lizard playing the castanets, and circled the room again to buttonhole Snagg, a horrible experience.

"Agriculture and Fisheries?" snarled Joe. "What d'you think this is, a bleedin aquarium?"

By now almost demented with dissatisfaction the bloke grabbed Picklewit's coat and demanded to know the meaning of the Agriculture and Fisheries outrage. "Agriculture and Fisheries? Look over there," Picklewit replied, pointing to Hilda's glass case. "That symbolic figure represents Fat Stock Prices and the Cattle Breeding Industry."

The rubicund man gave a sigh of relief and stood staring at Hilda in an embarrassing manner, rolling his eyes like catherine wheels and reciting passages from *The Farmer's Weekly* for the rest of the day, causing her acute discomfort and making her blush like a midwife at a night-club.

Sniggerley Bevels caused a rumpus soon after this incident, by reacting violently and decisively like the man of action he was, and of course is, to the *Mother of Parliamen*t exhibit. Sniggerley uttered a wee high-pitched screamlet à la *cham-pignon* and limbed off to seize a vase of flowers which decorated a nearby catalogue table. He scampered with it to the door, crying soulfully and dolefully: "I must save these innocent, harmless and lovely young plants from corruption and desecration by association with such ugly, degrading blasphemies." Unfortunately he was trapped among a low-class gang of small-bladdered hooligans larruping for the lavatories and was swept willy-nilly, hokus-pokus, horum-jorum, umblepumpfester, alp and illy and gulped down his foot,* into the Gentlemen's Convenience, from which resort he was unable to extricate himself until the Cataclysm, by

* See Henri Michaux, *passim*.

which time the flowers had been torn from his limp and listless grip and trodden recklessly underfoot by undistinguished and reprehensible boots. Sniggerley wept vast, unrestrained corocidle tears.*

The exhibit, which Sniggerley's concern for poor helpless vegetation had prevented him from soiling the purity of his eyes by studying, closely represented *The Mother of Parliaments*, a large, benevolent, full-skirted, full-bosomed webbing figure which with clockwork precision handed to a rickety blackboy figure a grimcrack model parliament which wouldn't work except to emit a "cuckoo" every time the local clocks struck the hour, thus: Gong. The Mum of Parls then turns away with matriarchical kindness only to receive a sharp clockwork kick in the webbing backside from the nitty little black pest.

Before the tableau which followed this heinous gallimaufry a strange gaggle had gathered like unto rooks on a book or cooks in a nook or cocks in a sock or etcetera on a so forth waiting for a so on to come suddenly trilling the Rose of Tralee. Namely, as it were, Ponce, Brute, Tripod and Buchan Hannay. Brute was now Ponce's right-hand man, i.e. messenger, stooge, tout and bodyguard. Hannay had brought Tripod along to cure him for ever of any desire to associate with riff-raff capable of perpetrating such insulting obscenities as those which now met their translucent orbs. Tripod was most upset to glimpse at such close quarters a former colleague, and with trembling disdain cut Brute dead when that worthy started forward with a low bellow of recognition. Brute was justifiably incensed at this gross insult and took practical action, viz. kicked Tripod heavily on the shooting-stick, thus bringing him into contact with the Mum of all Parliaments, old Granny Earth. Lying prostrate amid the wreckage of a small boy Tripod played several tremulous defensive strokes, fearing further assault; off each of these he would have been caught in the slips.

"You're a cad, sir!" said Buchan Hannay, who didn't

* The typewriter wishes to explain that corocidle tears are as different from crocodile ones as porps are from peas.

mince his words, giving Brute a steady glance from steely blue een.*

"And proud of it, flabby tool," the graceless bounder replied with a crude guffaw.

Buchan Hannay awarded him the kind of look which always discomfited foreign ambassadors, opposing captains, wicket-keepers, South American dictators, rude waiters, German and/or Russian spies and devilishly cunning criminals with Spanish blood in their varicose veins. Its effect on Brute was, broadly, that of gravy on an armadillo, so B. Hannay was forced to turn his deadly gaze instead on the neighbouring tableau. The effect of this lethal public school stare on the poor defenceless webbing was to keel over one of the least robust figures like a drunk sailor from Minneapolis and to stop one gramophone with an abrupt wheeeeeeeeeee-ceeeeeeeceff. You will be hoping, of course and notwithstanding if you can find a chair to sit in which is unlikely because Picklewit didn't waste cash on providing spectators with luxurious upholstery, to escape a description of the webbing glopstration upon which B. Hannay directed his unquenchable gentlemanly snawp. You will be disappointed. The tableau in question, to which there is an equally stupid answer, displayed a webbing Judge figure who gramphoned nasally at a number of tiny webbing malefactor figures which whizzed round him on a conveyor belt: "YOU could do with a whipping, *you* could do with a whipping, YoU could do with a whipping, yOu could do with a whipping, yoU could do with a whipping, and You and *YOU* and you," and then in a loud bray proclaimed "Everybody could do with a whipping, and a whopping whipping at that. National Regeneration Demands National Flagellation. In future Mothering Sunday will be followed every year by Whipping Monday." As he spoke the Judge figure rocked back and forth, back and forth, as if Buchan Hannay's beams of approval were strong

* One of the primary rules of style for we writers of boys' adventure stories is: never use the same word twice for one object. If you think eyes, orbs and een exhausts our stock in this particular connection you haven't peeped in Roget lately.

winds blowing from the realms of silence. Because, once Buchan had taken in the message of the tableau he was of course overjoyed and imagined Brute as the first victim of the Larruping Campaign.

Confident that the next room would also preach a strong moral lesson, Hannay drew Tripod into the *Social Education Section*, and gave an exhibit labelled Medical Science the benefit of his ordered attention. A webbing patient lay gagged and bound from head to foot in webbing bandages on a table from which hung a placard listing the diseases against which the noble fellow had been vaccinated, inoculated, inculcated, injected and immunised. These included scarlet fever, yellowjack, green fly, jaundice, mumps, whooping cough, smallpox, dementia praecox, John Knox, German measles, French flu, Danish rounders, diphtheria, scabies, rabies, babies, syphilis, Tiflis, hayfever, conjunctivitis, phlebitis, dermatitis, neuritis, gastritis, delirium tremens, impetigo, archipelago, hæmophilia, philosophy, adipose tissue, antinomianism, Clugg's disease and gluteus maximus. A webbing doctor-figure simultaneously or, to put it more plainly, at the same time, jabbed the corpse with a blunt needle in the only available space, i.e. the nether dorsal ganglion, and grandiosed a gramophone spiel about the necessity for vaccination if the world was to be made safe for democracy. Each time he jabbed the victim swelled horribly, each time he withdrew the needle the victim returned to normal and this process or recess went on and on with hypnotic regularity like that nonsense of the moon and the tides, the birds and the bees, the leaves and the trees, the housemaid and the policeman's knees.

"Serve the fellow right," said Hannay virtuously, and gave a disciplinary glance at the two oafish webbing figures engaged in a gramaphonic argument, who seemed indifferent to Harrovian disapproval and went on booming heartily, the cloth-capped figure: "I'll lay you a pound to a farthing the Mother of Parliaments is 250 years old to the second" and the bowler-hatted figure: "Drop dead if the Mother of Parliaments is a day less than 2,500 years old last Wednesday

fortnight." The webbing Mother of Parliament figure which trundled and regurgitated round and round on an electric camembert trolley bearing on her chest a placard reading: "1,005 years old" went on trundling and regurgitating round and neither of the contestants took the slightest notice of her. Every five minutes a webbing Welfare and Education Officer figure who had been nodding continually in clockwork agreement with both parties gramophoned fruitily: "An excellent example of the type of serious, virile and rational discussion we are attempting to educate the masses into achieving."

Each and all of these tedious, boring and despicable exhibits went through their sinful and insufferable performances endlessly, like a club bore, a ticktock or a comic on the music halls, until the clockwork didn't and Snagg came rummaging up and tinkered and tonkered irritably with huge stubby fingers attached as they were to ham-like hands. During the afternoon the Mother of Parliaments figure suddenly took a fancy to Joe and flung its webbing arms round him as he was tickling her clockwork. He had to take a reluctant and redundant part in the tableau for twenty minutes until Dean rescued the mum from what he took to be Snagg's barbarous and lascivious assault.

"If you lay a finger on any of my webbing wonders again," said Dean, "I'll drape *you* round Buckingham Palace."

"Webbing!" Snagg gruffeted. "If it wasn't for my clockwork your ruddy webbing would be as useless as a lot of tripe on a slab."

"The clockwork is nothing but a concession to materialism," roared Dean.

"I'll give you processions in delirium," garbled Snagg, lifting a hair-spring adjusting tool with nefarious intent.

It was a lucky thing that Charlatan went idealing past at that moment and thus saved the situation by explaining that both webbing and clockwork were Splendid Ideals, and would be ideally balanced like Good and Better in an Ideal World.

"No," Jonathan Dean replied, reverting abruptly to his

usual monosyllabic incommunicado, and "Show me an ideal bloody gasket," said Snagg, "and I'll be interested."

Buchan Hannay and Tripod were very keen to reach the *Games Room* but to get there had to pass through the *Entertainments Room* which contained a series of frames shaped like TV screens in one of which a group of webbing dummies played everyone's games for them, in another ate for them, in another went to bed for them and in the last were buried for them.*

In the *Games Room* itself Tripod met his Waterloo. A football tableau in which a British webbing footballer rigged out in a heavy jersey, calf-length shorts, knee-length stockings, immense shin-guards and metal plated leather boots with lead studs recoiled from a practically naked foreign footballer figure, clapped webbing hands over morally assaulted webbing eyes and banged the ball through his own goal to a roar of appreciative gramophonic cheering, caused the ex-photographer to click his tongue indifferently, for cricketers don't understand football, but the cricket exhibit, which demonstrated a new model bat with a huge handle hinged at right angles half way up so that the webbing cricketer figure could play clockwork forward defensive strokes without moving his feet from behind the crease, stunning the ball dead on the spot, sent Tripod rocking back heavily on the wrong end of his shooting-stick, murmuring: "*Forward* defensive strokes when the back defensive stroke is available! Not cricket!" in a shaking voice, and Buchan Hannay had to lead him from the building without inspecting the *Vacuist Room*, which contained only air surrounded by walls on one of which a painted arrow pointed down to a section of loose boarding.† No one had been sufficiently interested to lift this until Ponce, ever snuffling for copy, wobbled in, spread a lace-edged purple

* There were other exhibits, such as the Free Expression one in which an Education and Welfare officer nodded with tolerant understanding while an odious webbing urchin kicked his dad in the pants while that worthy bent down to lift a shattered and expensive toy, but we couldn't describe them all. Dean doesn't deserve it.

handkerchief on the floor, knelt down carefully after meticulously adjusting his knife-edge creases and prised up the loose board with a silver-plated pocket knife. A powder-puff on a spring shot up and hit him on the nose. Ponce had a heart-attack and was given artificial respiration of such forcefulness by the loyal but intemperate Brute that he nearly died on the spot and was carried back to Fleet Street in an ambulance hired by Lord Blithermore.

Charlatan's Ideals Room was a sideshow rather than an integral part of the main exhibition and contained a series of academic paintings depicting a noble knight rescuing a fair damsel from the attentions of a fire-breathing dragon, Tristram and Iscalt lying blissfully and chastely asleep with a naked sword between them, a troubadour imprinting an abstract kiss on the lily-white hand of a nun, the Death of Nelson, Sir Philip Sidney handing over his water to the dying soldier, the Charge of the Light Brigade and the Wreck of the Hesperus. There were also photographs of politicians at a Conference on World Peace and International Disarmament—the ninetieth meeting to decide which order the items should appear on the agenda; Boy Scouts singing the Chestnut Tree at an All-Nations Jamboree; cosmopolitan Esperantists at camp on a wet Sunday in Germany, and framed copies of the Atlantic Charter, the Gettysburg Address, Magna Carta, the Declaration of Independence, the Hague Convention and President Wilson's Fourteen Points, each point covered with a wee thimble in case it pricked anybody.

Charlatan divided his time between the Enquiries Kiosk, Hilda's glass case and the Ideals Room. On one visit there he was shocked to notice a scrap of paper pinned below the Gettysburg Address, reading: "Government of the people is common enough, Government by the people's impossible till everyone looks after his own business and Government for the people is wool falling over sheeps' eyes." Charlatan paled as appallingly pale as the White Whale. He had recognised Picklewit's handwriting. That traitor! Was he too in the paw of Handonose?

Staggering and swivel-eyed with palsy Charlatan reeled off

to console Hilda with tea and himself with Hilda, only to suffer an even more terrible experience. Two men-like beings, one dressed from nose to toes all in black like an undertaker's assistant playing for New Zealand at Rugby, and the other a dark-skinned, dark-eyed warrior with flashing teeth, a huge scimitar-shaped nose and enormous befingered hands, were even now smashing the door of Hilda's glass case with knobby clubs.* The Gallup Pole, for it was he, drew a stiletto from a drawer in his tights and pounced nimbly, thus: pounce (nimbly), towards Hilda, who dropped her trident, trilled thrillingly and beat on the glass with her wee fistikins like a frightened boxing kangaroo. Charlatan, brave fellow that he was, hurled himself forward by dint of grasping his own trousers and the collar of his shirt; the dark boulder tripped him and slumped down on his head like the Lord Chancellor on the woosack. Päperjacket, seeing the fray from afar, began forcing his way through the stolid throng, but alas, too late. . . .

The Pole's stiletto stabbed cleanly, there was a pop and a long surprised whoosh as Hilda's plastic left-breast disappeared like a dream. Pop. Her right breast followed with a shocked sheeeewee. Hilda moaned and buried her face in her hands. The crowd of small boys surrounding the cage thought this great fun and cheered enthusiastically through their gobstoppers. Pop. Her plastic gluteus maximus became a gluteus minimus in less time than it takes to ulp and ilp. Pop-pop. Pop. Pop. Shwoooooosh. Woeee. Wheeoosh. The now motionless, helpless, hopeless Hilda seemed to melt, disintegrate, dissolve, became vapour before Charlatan's staring eyes. "O horror, horror, horror piled on horror," Charlatan wailed, realising for the first time the meaning of Picklewit's sinister hints, Hilda's fears and the nature of the wheels which revolve endlessly within the mysterious wheels of the incomprehensible universe. A plastic girl! A smoke-like beauty! A bubble loveliness! A glory created by the bicycle-pump! A manufactured splendour!

* Savage, Portland, Carlton and Garrick clubs, to be precise.

"Oh, Charlatan, Charlatan," Hilda called in a faint high faraway voice like that of a fairy destined to become but a wisp of gas and whisk away on the grey wind which moaned about the Hall.

Charlatan was rescued by a sudden eruption of indignation from the rubicund Agriculture and Fisheries expert. He had been watching the disintegration of Fat Stock Prices with mounting fury, convinced that this was some Communistic plot, and with a moo of rumbustious disapprobation he clouted the Dark Monster who lolled insolently on Charlatan's neck with the sweeping blow of a bull flicking flies with its tail.

With a superhuman spiritual spasm of galvanic energy Charlatan squirmed and struggled from beneath the now limp and sagging Dark Enemy and dashed skirling into the desecrated sanctum.

"Better'n Karloff any day," observed a lout. "See er bum pop? Just like a bloomin bloon. Best thing I seen in years."

The Gallup Pole clip-clopped away, mingling his whinnies with the mumbles of the mob as Päperjacket, thundering: "Doom! Agents of Doom!" went stampeding after him bullop blap.

Charlatan knelt beside the sobbing wraith which was all that remained of Hilda Houri, Symbol of British Rejuvenation, Personification of the National Future, Glory of Anglo-Saxon Womanhood. . . .

"Come Hilda, come my love," said Charlatan, frenetic with tenderness now that she was no longer beautiful, no longer desirable, no longer buxom, no longer pinchable, no longer the feast of hungry eyes, but merely the Ideal Waif, the Essential Orphan, the quintessence of pitiful and deserted innocence, a castaway on the shores of time, a delicate defiled soul to be cosseted and restored to courage, protected from the cruel ravages of reality. With the gentle strength of a loving bear he wrapped her warmly in a Union Jack, lifted her in his spindly arms and left the building with his beloved burden, by the back door, Vacuism, the Cultural Mission, Sir Arnold Springthorpe, Picklewit, and his life's work for-

gotten, his eyes misted with tears and his being flooded with a deep sense of the mystery and pity of it all.

"Serve er right," growled the surly mob. "Fakes! Quislings! Swindlers! Spivs! Tricksters! Impostors! False bum! Garn, get out of it, Plastic!" Charlatan only smiled the more sweetly, impervious to the crude abuse, safe for the time being in the life-jacket of his ideals.

So it was that he knew nothing of the startling climax to the day until he read an account in the newspapers on the following morning. Only a quarter of an hour after the Popping of Hilda, which Picklewit had witnessed with a sense of impending doom from a chair in the Enquiries Kiosk, a babble of excited voices and a shuffle of benighted feet heralded the approach of something sensational and grand like Marilyn Monroe on an elephant or Farouk in a perouque, or Gilbert Harding on a penny-farthing.

First came a phalanx of policemen and dismounted Horse Guards, thrusting back the crowd against the Enquiries Kiosk and the Porridge Bar till each member felt like a pancake under a steamroller. The Horse Guards were very annoyed, not unnaturally we feel, because some irreverent persons saw fit to gurggle and giggle and burst into celts and gales of laughter on observing their own faces in the distorting mirrors of those ridiculous breast-plates.

But when, in the wake of the common policemen and the glorious and bandy-legged Horse Guards sailed two silver-braided, flat-hatted superintendents carrying knobby canes and all the dignity of law, order, authority, discipline, efficiency, orthodoxy and honi soit qui mal y pense, comment and giggliarianism ceased pronto and preternatural hush fell like rain upon the plains beneath. The only sounds were the voices of P.C. Tombs calling "Move along there! Give your names and addresses! Number off from left to right and Knees up, Mother Brown," and that of Stodge carolling merrily, as was his wont "Porridge shakes! Oatmeal cock-tails! Porry Floss! Come and get it!"

Then Picklewit, still perched on his chair to see over the heads of the craning crowd, nearly fell off with amazement,

dismay and Dostoevskian tremors. Into sight, escorted with deference by lack-lustre lackeys and luckless jockeys marched Sir Arnold Springthorpe. Superintendents, inspectors, sergeants, common constables and Horse Guards all bowed and scraped till they split their breeches, while Sir Arnold's cold pudding-like eyes popped and skidded round the Hall eventually fastening on Picklewit's astounded and disreputable face. He extended a pink finger like a chippolata sausage and "Arrest that man!" he cried. "I denounce him as a Communist and a traitor."

"I'm not a Communist!" yelled Picklewit furiously. "I'm a crook." The crowd swayed and hissed like a congeries of snakes.

"Well, Fascist then, who cares," Sir Arnold snapped firmly. He then poked his finger towards Päperjacket, whose head was plainly visible as he towered above the crushed mash. "Arrest that renegade Librarian. Arrest Charlatan, wherever he may be. Arrest the madman Stodge and the diabolist Dean, who is responsible for these obscene webbing outrages. Arrest Snagg, I denounce them all as traduccers of Britain's fair name, insulters of the constitution and confidence tricksters to boot."

"What about Hilda?" Picklewit shouted, incensed that anyone should escape scot free if he was going to catch a packet.

A faint smile hovered on Sir Arnold's lips like a hyperional thought above the sleeping brow of Keats between the sheets. "I do not see any reason to have my own daughter arrested," he complacently remarked.

The full extent of the monster's machiavellian perfidy came home to Picklewit with the force of a volume of Klopstock. "Snagg!" he roared, "It's the cops! Get the pantechnicon going! Let's get out of here."

"Stop him," Sir Arnold called, his cold eyes snapping like icicles struck by bullets within the mass of his haggis-like face.

But it wasn't so easy to stop him. Picklewit hurled himself from the counter of the kiosk in a swallow-dive, landing flat

out on the collective head of a family named Polter—Mum, Dad, Ernie, Emily and little Geist. Then he wiggled down like a nit in a sweater and crawled along on all fours. The policemen couldn't move for the crowd and the crowd couldn't move for the policemen, while the Horse Guards didn't dare get their breast-plates dirty by contact with the populace for fear of what R.S.M. Gutts would say.

In his official enthusiasm to apprehend a malefactor one proper soppy copper, bustling through the murmurous and befuddled mass knocked from its pedestal the webbing figure of Mr. Gladstone popping Disraeli in one of his well-known bags which served as a centre-piece to the exhibition. There was a wild berserk yell and Jonathan Dean, vampire-eyed and lumphibious, sprang to the attack, flinging citizens, voters, rate-payers and income-tax evaders aside like soiled gloves, chaff in the wind and outmoded clichés, and caught the constable, noble yet luckless fellow, a pile-driver in the central district and he went down thub like a tub with a sough like a wind in the willows. "Ruin my webbing, you crass baboons, and I'll cause you inconvenience, you philistine lubbers!" the enraged artist trumpeted, and seizing a nearby neckwear salesman named Hopkins, tossed him up like a googly at the superintendents. He came down on a perfect length, spun in from the off and shattered their stumps. In less time than it takes to say "Lumpy porridge" Dean had cleared a space large enough to swing a corpse in and was doing ditto with wild abandon. Stodge joined in by throwing hard balls of compressed porridge into the enemy ranks. The sound of the pantechnicon's motor swelled into a defiant roar.

Päperjacket, Picklewit, Stodge and Dean charged for the back entrance bowling over bewildered spectators and outraged new statesmen like ripe fruit in a hurricane. They piled into the back of the already moving pantechnicon in a tangle of limbs, heads and oathy poathy. Only Stodge couldn't reach sanctuary in time, his legs were too short, and he came trotting along behind like a little pig going to market. Päperjacket extended a vast hand and plucked him in like a plum from a porridge pie. The whole mob huddled and bubbled

in pursuit with lurch and shout in reel and rout—Horse Guards, proper sloppy coppers, the Polter family, Bunyip Gracedieu, Gilbert Ponce, Quintus Brute, Buchan Hannay, Dennis Tripod, the Gallup Pole, the Dark Monster, P.C. Tombs, the neckwear salesman, Sniggerley Bevels, Miss Stingray and her flower-hatted horde, Negley Farson, Johnson Clutterbuck, Ned Gouls and the Fruitarian Society of Greater London, in fact everybody, even Bert Laggs, all pell mell and humpus grumpus, what a ruction and a rumpus, alp and ilp and gulped down his foot.

Jonathan Dean snatched up one of his patent webbing repeating rifles* and shot off a policeman's helmet. "Mabel, Mabel," the poor man moaned and tottered against the wall of a corset factory as the pantechnicon lumbered into Watney Street.

"Poor old Charlie," Picklewit muttered to himself. "Couldn't escape from the mob. He's had his chips." And so he had. He was just finishing the last one and plying Hilda with batter-jacketed fish in Jack's Slick Snack Bar, W.1.

* What did they repeat? "Webbing, webbing, webbing", naturally.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*The bewildered man's guide to
an inexplicable tangle*

SOME READERS ARE not even intelligent and we doubt if you are. We are therefore driven to the boring expediency of stopping every now and again to explain our explanations. It is possible that some of you may not be clear in your containers what this is all about, despite the footnotes. Even if you are, don't skip this chapter. It's good.

Who is Sir Arnold Springthorpe? This man, who in chapter one was merely a name on a grubby piece of paper, is now revealed as the biggest menace to human society since Genghis Khan. But he is more than that. If you looked in *Who's Who* you would discover that he is the Managing Director of Snuffaglove Holdings Ltd. and Inc., but you would not find that he is also the founder of the Handonose Society. You know that he is in charge of the Cultural Mission for the Disentropification of Britain that actually sports his name as a kind of favour. You may be less or even unaware that he holds the patent for a Flat Sausage Machine. But to plumb Sir Arnold's depths would be supererogatory and indecent and we don't propose any such plumbing. Before you go on we want you to look back at pages 14-81 and read them three times. Then you might start linking up this with that, connecting negative with positive, Hands Across the Ocean, Supra-Racial Jam-Making Committees—there's no end to it, especially if you can sell at a profit.

Sir Arnold Springthorpe was born Nathan Pearlbutton,

innocent son of a depraved and impecunious country parson, who was obnoxious during childhood because of his running nose, adenoids and lisp. Thanks to these, he won a scholarship to a school for the Remains of Diseased Clergy and before you could say Billy Graham he was in the Diplomatic Service, suffering cruelly from Foreign Parts, making disgusting friends, learning unpleasant words and picking up unsavoury ideas from Gyppos, Persians, Parthians, Parsees and Copts. On his return to Britain he changed his name to the salubrious collocation of syllables with which we are now so familiar and started cranking up his machinations. His was a cunning mind—note how in his mad lust for power over the English he became obsessed with that utterly unEnglish characteristic, a determination to succeed. There was a Jewish touch to Nathan, he felt, and with sinister sangfroid he bartered British Israel support for the hope of a larger one. (Arnold was British and public-school; Spring: rebirth, renaissance, resurgence, restitution; Thorpe: the spirit of Saxon Britain, an Angle in every ingle.)

To put it in a mere fifteen syllables, Sir Arnold was determined to be the British McCarthy. He knew that all Britain would be behind him if they could only hear of him. He knew that Britain required strong men, beating, flogging, laceration, flagellation, Whipping Monday to follow Mothering Sunday. The British public would know it too once they were told—after all, their most endearing characteristic was their anxiety to believe whatever the Press or a politician told them. Sir Arnold's strategy was clear: he must first tell the public what was wrong and then persuade them that he alone could put it right. He took the public eye by a series of financial adventures which never fail to win the British wage slave's admiration, e.g., his building up of Snuffaglove into the largest monopoly in Montgomeryshire, followed by its acquisition of majority shares in U.F.A., British Lion and Nile Feluccas. Secretly, and only a few coloured henchmen knew this, his aim was to behead everyone who refused to bow to civic statues. He had a scale of punishments for graded offences: citizens who refused to laugh at a comedian's gag-

line had their teeth drawn out; refusal to join an adult education seminar led to public disgrace and the wearing of a lavatory seat round the neck like a halter; criticism of M.P.s (not their policies, no one minded that, that was healthy criticism) resulted in a steep increase in income tax deduction at source to the personal benefit of the injured party. All these things were hypothetical and suppository and conjectural, yet they had a real existence in Sir Arnold's container and goaded him on when other men would have faltered.

But Sir Arnold was in a dilemma. His ambition was to be dictator of a strong, virile nation, yet no one can possibly impose himself upon a people unless they are weak and flabby. There was considerable weakness and flabbiness in the British constitution and Sir Arnold was encouraged to climb up the flagpole and do a Stylites in modern style—but how could this weak and flabby people become strong and virile? How could it, for instance, do what every strong and virile nation considered itself bound in honour to do, and that was to beat up some tiny nation which only had a token air force and three rubber dinghies? But Sir Arnold's intelligence was stiletto-sharp and, like most stilettos, was used in the back only. He knew that to get a strong, virile nation he would have to rouse this weak, flabby one to a pitch of genuine fury against something irrelevant and unimportant. Sir Arnold rose to an entirely new strategy; he plumped for culture. A choice almost beyond human cunning it was. Think of all the objects in the world—grasshoppers, casements, cruisers, human beans, grundoons and gromits for instance—but never will you find such an explosive red herring as culture. Why, people loathe it. No Englishman worth the name will have anything to do with it. It's well known (you've only to read Kingsley Martin) that the only possible defence against dictatorship is culture. What more could Sir Arnold want? Here was a nexus of niceties that screamed out for obliteration: the public hated it and dictatorship needed it for their Chamber of Horrors. And so we have the spectacle of Sir Springthorpe standing forth boldly as the leader of a nation which, whilom weak and flabby, is rejuvenating itself into

strong and virile through furious violence in the service of legitimate racial aspirations.*

After the aspiration the sedative, eh? Bewildered? Us too. If Sir Springthorpe's argument appears dubious the fault is plainly his, not ours. We would never have thought of it if he hadn't instigated it.

The plan is now less opaque, of course. All would-be dictators require cohorts to scarify frightened little men and women who would do exactly what you tell them without cuffing their ears or pulling out their finger-nails. This was where Sir Springthorpe's Middle Eastern experiences became valuable. He enlisted a troop of Tottenham Court Road coloured band leaders who terrorised W.C. for days on end (the most serious outbreak of mob violence in London since the Gordon Riots, according to Glosper), swinging saxophones at any citizen who dared show his nose outside his basement and bashing greengrocers with kettledrums, while shouting "A Springthorpe! A Springthorpe!" Of course, they went too far and a mild reproof was addressed to Sir Arnold by the Lord Mayor (who happened to be his step-brother) and Sir Arnold disavowed all knowledge of the outrage, supplying proof that he had spent the weekend in a Scottish shooting lodge listening to *classical* music! We leave it to you to decide whether he should be believed or not. For our part, we are convinced that the sinister Handonoff was the product of what came to be known as the Percy Street Jam Fest.

Having built up his organisation, Sir Springthorpe now needed something to attack. With brilliant incisiveness he decided to send a Cultural Mission the length and breadth of Britain. He knew, the crafty fellow, that the British public would gibber with rage at such an invasion of their racial porkishness, and would demand executive action and possibly

* There is another theory regarding Sir Springthorpe's culturephobia. At the age of 19 he published a novel called *Mémoires d'Enfer*, remarkable for its absence of verbs and profusion of italics. It was published by Rubber Products Ltd. of Praed Street. This, although a *succes d'estime*, only sold four copies and left Sir Springthorpe (or, to use his literary *nom de guerre*, Anthony Delacroix) miserable and nasty.

public executions (if the new-fangled shrinking from capital punishment could be set on one side). And now we see Sir Springthorpe's genius at its zenith: he deliberately hired Picklewit and Charlatan to lead the Mission.

These two worthies had already gained an unenviable reputation, even before Sir Springthorpe had left school. They had been primarily responsible for the Vacuist movement which for a period emptied every art-dealer's shop in the country. They had been associated with the so-called madman Dean, who had draped Buckingham Palace with webbing, webbing which had actually been filched from the barracks of the Horse Guards. They had edited a scurrilous sheet which had gained entry into, if not every home in the country, at least a few of them, and had caused pain to many an honest burgher-poet and museum-fictioneer. A catalogue of their acts would needlessly lengthen our chronicle. Suffice it to say that, in the opinion of Sir Springthorpe and every other sleepwalker, any plan with which these two were associated was booked for failure. The devilish ingenuity of this policy, which on the face of it would have been dear to a diseased imagination of the simple, defensive-stroke, minor public school type such as Tripod's, is now seen in its true colours. Was ever Macchiavellian cunning more skilfully deployed? Of course not, else we wouldn't have asked. Here was a man who had created two organisations, for the sole purpose that they might grapple in Herculean conflict, and that he might mount to power over the lifeless body of one of them, master of a weak and flabby nation that had become strong and virile and was ready to beat hell out of Nicaragua or Monaco.

But: the plan did not go according to schedule. Sir Springthorpe had been ill-informed about the character of the two men he had set up as stooges. He thought that Charlatan and Picklewit would collapse at the first sound of Bix Beiderbecke's cornet. That was his mistake, the mistake that cost him a throne—or, since he was a thoroughly modern man, a Rolls Royce with twenty-five armed police on motor-cycles making life impossible with their electric* sirens. If

* The other kind would have made control of the machines difficult.

Charlatan and Picklewit had been normal gutless pedagogues, fluting about Britain's heritage and France's loanage, we would now be writhing beneath the foot of Sir Springthorpe—admittedly, most of us would be all the happier for it, but that's by the by and for the nonce. As it was, Picklewit, as it were, and Charlatan, because he couldn't help it, having once been erected insisted on staying erected, if not as statues at least as phallic symbols.

There is one more point which must be explained. The Gallup Pole, though appointed leader of Handonose by Sir Arnold, was not completely in his confidence, and did not know that Hilda was his employer's daughter. Thus his efforts to kidnap the young lollipop. Not that Sir Arnold minded what happened to his daughter or to anyone else for that matter. It was Springthorpe Sir Arnold was interested in. But in any case we don't expect you to understand the plot perfectly. We ourselves are sometimes amazed at our own ingenuity.

That's the end of this chapter. The rest is not silence but appendage. You might say (and if you're awkward and cantankerous you will) that Charlatan's a sap and not at all sterling and all that. We can dismiss that pretty quickly by analogy. Some years ago the pound was devalued but it's just as sterling to you as it was before, isn't it? It's the same with Charlatan. He can't help having ideals, and he needs a room to keep them in. If he sometimes goes too far and becomes silly there's always Picklewit to pull him out. It is a partnership, you see—a point that Sir Springthorpe forgot. And on the other hand, when Picklewit becomes too impossibly arid and flinty, Charlatan has been known to recite "The Song of the Shirt" to him; this rouses fury in the breast of Picklewit and, against his will, he becomes momentarily human and sentimental.

Now you know all there is to know about the Springthorpe Conspiracy. Don't complain about loose ends. Of course there are loose ends. Use your common sense, fatuous reader. Do you know every nook and cranny of Hitler's campaign? Was Stalin's container an open book to you? Were you never

mystified by Napoleon? Is Senator Joe a logical process? Despite his inhuman cunning, Sir Springthorpe was not one hundred per cent. consistent. An example: his mother told reporters that once, as a little boy, he forgot to pull the lavatory chain after use. If there are a few unpulled chains in this book don't blame us. Blame Sir Springthorpe. Or the plumbing. Wake up!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

In which Charlatan gets stuck

CHARLATAN STAGGERED FROM that hall of horror, one hand clasped to his clammy brow, the other clutching the hand of the now wraith-like Hilda. So light, so ethereal, so ephemeral was she now that she rarely touched earth but fluttered in the air like a streamer, tethered only by one string-like arm to Charlatan.

As he ran like the Hound of Heaven through eternal corridors of the harsh world, Charlatan's container was a furnace of emotion, wild terror, unmentionable fears, heart-felt sorrow and unshed tears. His feeble cortex groped with the new situation. He understood nothing. The world seemed to be revolving in sinister movement, meaningless and uncaring, while all around him his ideals fell like broken gods or went puff like bladders of dried seaweed.

• One moment life had been rich, enticing, godlike, parnassian; now it was a stinking reptile, a hall of mirrors, where chastity bore the lascivious features of Brute, where international harmony was a cushion sat upon by Picklewit, and feminine beauty went puff like the bladders of dried seaweed.

Scurry, skelter; hurry helter; mutter mumble, glitter grumble; there a shape here a shape; apparitions closing in and then passing through with nonchalant moans; ambitions rising up and then falling with the clatter of old bones. And always, at his side, whistling through the air like an undone toilet roll, Hilda the Beautiful, Hilda the Hour of Britain,

Hilda the Prize Female—but alas, Hilda the Popped. All that pulsating flesh, all that heaving gallimaufry of red and white corpuscles, that vast amalgam of sensual delight—all gone, all dissipated into a tenuous trickle of string, gristle, tissue paper and glue.

So on they ran ran ran—or at least, Charlatan ran ran ran while Hilda went bump soar bump, but only tiny bumps because she was only just heavier than air, like the early flying machines. With a gulp Charlatan finally turned into a working man's café and practically collapsed on a chair, still holding grimly to Hilda's microscopic hand. She, the pathetic creature, sailed three times round the room, her voluminous Union Jack bathing costume floating behind her like ectoplasm trying to be sensational, and then gently came to rest on a chair opposite Charlatan, the costume neatly coiling itself around her sparse frame 72 times.

All around were British working men, sitting with knives and forks poised, watching this strange irruption into their ordered existence. Then each winked at the other and returned to his fish and chips.

Charlatan was trying to clear his container of extraneous elements. During the last few days he had been conducting an exhausting conflict, his passionate ardent nature against his moral altruistic nature. (Charlatan had no base nature at all.) His dilemma was cruel beyond the pangs of normal experience. He felt he was sitting on iron railings especially sharpened for the purpose. Back and forth, to and fro, waged the conflict. On the previous night, when he had lain sleepless on his bed (the sheets of which he had sprinkled freely with biscuit crumbs to aid mortification of the body) his ardent passionate nature had declared at 450 with only five wickets down and his moral altruistic nature had spent the rest of the night, until dawn's rosy fingers peeped through the curtains and stained his chamber pot, scraping for a mere 125 all out. This, Charlatan knew, was the Black Night of the Soul. He groaned as he realised that he had always referred to himself in his private brain-washings as the White Knight

of the S.C.M. (Springthorpe Cultural Mission but also the Student Christian Movement).

He ordered two plates of fish and chips, smiled wanly at Hilda, squeezed her fingers (which went snap snap like dry twigs) and then returned to continue the match. Passion was out. After a long and furious innings he had been caught in the slips by Pity off Disaster. He was now waiting for Bestiality, a savage slogger, to come in, and the light was far too good to appeal against. At the other end was that heart-breaking stonewaller Guilt, who nagged his way through every match for an endless series of unstylish not-outs.

He turned his agony-ridden eyes, misted by tears and steamy atmosphere, to Hilda.

"Hilda," he said, and stopped.

Once again he said "Hilda," but his voice broke.

Manfully he did a quick job of repair and then for a third time said "Hilda."

She answered, "Yes, Charlie," a thin little whisper like a summer breeze playing hide and seek with buttercups.

His heart kicked violently against his ribs. Then he found his tongue. "My dear," he said, blushing, "desperation compels me to speak to you as I have never spoken to women before. Except," he added, his native honesty rearing 'self up like a giraffe, "to my mother."

He stopped, looking at her anxiously. She smiled, a little rose petal in distress.

"That smile," he said. "So small, so teeny-wecny, yet sufficient to uproot empires and to make heroes of book-makers. And you called me Charlie," he said abruptly. He could scarcely hear himself speak for the knocking of his internal combustion engine.

Once again she said "Poor Charlie," and laid her twigs caressingly on his long idealised fingers.

"What happened?" he exclaimed wildly. "At first, all glory. The exhibition, designed for the regeneration of our trembling nation. Above all, my ideals room. I watched their faces, Hilda, as they came out. I saw honest tears streaming

down faces which the world calls coarse—engine-drivers reeling from visions that are denied them on the footplate, statisticians stuffing handkerchiefs in their mouths to force back unfamiliar emotions, children stretching out their chubby little pudsy hands for a mere touch of the dreams that are so evanescent on the playground. Chastity, Hilda, Spiritual Love, International Harmony—concepts buried deep in every human breast and there, in that little room amid the clamour of London's mercenary roar, achieving utterance. Not even Picklewit's crude comments could debase them. They shone forth like—like—like good balls in a naughty over. At first I felt bitter, I wanted to walk up to Picklewit and pull his ears—but then I was suffused with a sense of charity and I said to myself, No, no, violence breeds violence, the toad of intolerance spawns tadpoles of broken heads and shattered values. I couldn't do it. I forgave. I trembled at that moment, Hilda, as though I had been teetering on the edge of a latrine—and I stepped back."

He ran an anguished hand through his hair. "But that was not all. I saw the Pole—oh horror piled on horror, I saw the Pole. But I cannot go on. I saw you, Hilda, strapping and bulbous, suddenly disappearing before my very eyes, not in clouds of glory, the vehicle I had always considered yours by divine right, but in a whoosh of exhausted air. And yet, at that very moment, about to dash my head against a webbing model parliament, I stayed. Hold, Charlatan, I said to myself, hold and consider. Is it not possible that this, the final blow, is not also part of the burden which some inscrutable yet far-seeing fate has chosen for you to carry, like Christian, to the wicket gate. Stay, Charlatan! might it not be written in the Book that thou too shouldst die for the People? Might it not be, in some arcane yet utterly consistent fashion, nay, not a fashion but a cosmic design, that thou shouldst answer in this manner for the sins, not of thyself alone, but of thy companions, good honest fellows that they are, yet adrift, lost, blinded by the facets of the jungle we call existence?"

"That'll be three shillings, sir," said the proprietor, irked

by Charlatan's confession that he was a sinner and wishing to keep a good name for his house.

"Not yet, my good man," said Charlatan irritably, "I'm not finished. Bring some coffee."

Charlatan smiled wanly at Hilda who flickered back. "It was indeed a horrific moment as these ideas coursed through my container," he went on, "but now all is clear, the truth wraps my soul, like a muff. I am to blame for all that has happened. I have been lustful against my will. I have surrendered to the grisly claims of passion. I have responded to the siren-call of flesh. Hilda, I will make a clean breast if it is the last thing I do. Allow me to take the blame. Shower these shoulders with the scorn of the world. Hate me, buffet me, slap me, tickle me, sit on me, spit on me. Hilda! I swear by the sacred name of Chastity that I am your friend. Never again will I gaze on your more intimate parts and feel the saliva oozing through my lips. Never again will I succumb to the filthy importunities of Picklewit and shyly pinch your bottom!"

A tiny tear, smaller than a pinhead, fell on the table in front of Hilda.

"Why Hilda!" cried Charlatan, a poem in pity, "you are crying! But cry not for me. Cry for orphans, for widows and English footballers, but never for me."

"I'm crying for myself," she sniffed.

Charlatan was taken aback. Selfishness from Hilda, the filthy thought crossed his container, then he struck himself violently on the nose. Selfishness from Hilda, he shouted inwardly, is divine selfishness.

He stroked her arm. "Tell me," he cooed encouragingly. "With the help of the noblest principles nothing is impossible."

"I have done you a wrong," she sniffed.

"That is impossible," he said flatly. "No man could ever be wronged by fabulous beauty." He bent forward and whispered. "I do not see with the human eye," he said, "I gaze out from an embattled soul."

"I would never have done it if I had known how nice you are," she wailed.

•

"My niceness is not mine," he answered, sterling fellow that he was. "It is the property of my principles."

"My name is not even Hilda Hourie," she said.

Charlatan put his head back and laughed with intellectual power. "Sweetest flower of Britain," he cried, "we must learn to discriminate between this and that, between heaven and hell, reality and apparition. Your name is your secret possession. Do not give it to the world until the world proves itself worthy. Ha! Have you a pseudonym. Is Miss Rita Hayworth Rita Hayworth in very fact? Was not the Pompadour born Poisson, that is to say Fish? Was Miss Two-Ton Tessie O'Shea christened Two-Ton by the parish priest? No, Hilda, this is the veriest flummery of existence."

He bent forward and said earnestly, "Our true names are written in golden letters in God's secret register. He is their guardian." He flung one hand in the air and shouted, "Names are but hostages to fortune."

A tear-stained face, the size of an apple, peered at him in bottomless misery. "I am Sir Arnold Springthorpe's daughter."

Charlatan rose to his feet. "Beauteous Hilda, suffused with modesty—art thou in very truth the vital product of England's saviour?" He raised his voice. "Coffees all round," he shouted. "Let us drink to the rejuvenation of England that sits here in the flesh and the blood." He gazed compassionately at the miserable assemblage of gristle and Union Jack that sat opposite him, faltered a moment, brightened and then cried, "What is flesh? What is blood? The spirit is all. Let us bathe at the spring of Thorpe."

Some of the working men called across, "We'll ave tea, mate, if it's not taking a liberty."

The proprietor, stolid and unrejuvenated, said, "You aven't paid for the other two yet."

"Who cares for payment? What is money? Let us replace mundane cares and pecuniary trifles with the milk of human kindness."

"An yer can put that kind o milk in yer cawfee," grumbled the proprietor. He went on muttering under his breath about

some people thinking he was born yesterday and he wasn't that kind of dope, he wasn't.

Hilda was as pale as milk herself. "You don't understand," she groaned. "We have cheated you. My father only set up the Springthorpe Cultural Mission so that he could knock it down again. He ordered me to build myself up into the type of glorious British womanhood by the addition of falsies (plastic), bladders (plastic), floaters, bloaters, footballs, air-balloons, Dunlopillos, Li-los and every conceivable form of magnifier until I should become a national Lollobrigida, the man-in-the-street's best girl, a super-houri."

Charlatan sat down. He would have been the first to claim that spiritual deflation is far more depressing than mere physical deflation. "Was it—deception?" he murmured, hating to let the word escape.

"Oh much worse. Much much much much worse. I have a horrible feeling that it was all arranged, that the Pole is in my father's pay; that Daddy was willing to sacrifice his only legitimate daughter to his own vaulting ambition, ruthlessly allowing her to be Popped in Public. Oh, Mr. Charlatan, how I wish I had warned you, but I daren't. Father threatened to send me to a monastery if I refused his behests. It must have been his henchmen, the dreaded emissaries of Handonose, who left all those notes about "

"The monster," sighed Charlatan. He looked moodily about the room. "There is but one thing left for me to do. I must die."

"Oh no, Mr. Charlatan," cried the wretched girl. "Things are never as bad as they seem. You have so much good in you. I think your ideals are marvellous. Couldn't you get a job in a prep school? The younger generation needs you so much."

"I must die," reiterated Charlatan. "Päperjacket was right. Doom, doom, tis all doom."

Hilda sniffed. "I'm ever so sorry," she said.

Charlatan sat erect. He crossed one leg, then the other. He folded his hands, he blew his nose, his face twitched, he pulled the lobes of his ears, he started to glow with a bud

of inner warmth such as only men of a certain character are privileged to experience. He bent forward.

"You said you were—sorry?" he asked.

"Of course I am. You are so nice. I've never been frightened when I've been with you. Now that Mr. Picklewit, he's different. He used to nip so hard. He didn't seem to nip with conviction like Mr. Brute—not that I cared for Mr. Brute really," she added hastily. "Calculating machine, indeed! Whatever next? Ferguson tractors, I should think."

"Yes yes yes yes yes," said Charlatan. "Never mind about that now. You said you were sorry."

"If I ever see that Mr. Brute again I'll just give him a piece of my mind," said Hilda.

"He's quite immaterial to our present dilemma," said Charlatan, his voice tinged with impatience. "Did you really mean you were sorry? I mean, did you mean with real inner meaning that you regret what you have done?"

"Of course I do," she said listlessly.

Charlatan beamed. "Then, don't you see, all is not lost after all? You suffer remorse, I forgive—oh, Hilda, the delights of forgiveness. Have you ever felt its demiurgic tremors coursing through your veins? But of course you have, you, the flower of womanhood, Britain's reply to the Venus of Milo and other tawdry exemplars of classical sub-idealism. Hilda, by your divine sorrow, by a fabulous act of mercy, we are saved. Saved to continue the good work. Saved to forgive and to go on forgiving until our work becomes a benediction and the nation kneels in repentance!"

"Oh Mr. Charlatan, how you do carry on," sighed Hilda, her eyes glistening and her container still fondling the memory of Brute.

"Away, away," Charlatan called out airily, jumping to his feet and gallantly offering his arm to the spirit of British womanhood. "To pastures new and endless opportunities for forgiveness," he carolled.

"That'll be eight bob altogether," said the proprietor (an odious man, some would say, but in Charlatan's view the rather pious temple of the divine fire).

Charlatan paled. "You still insist," he stammered. "Even in the new era of love?"

"You'll go out on your ear if you don't pay up," said that unimaginative vendor.

"I'll pay," whispered Hilda. Little did Charlatan know that she had been receiving five shillings weekly from her father.

Outside it was dark. "We must find lodgings," said Charlatan, who had an astonishing grasp of mundane things when required.

But it wasn't easy. Every bed in town seemed to be full, some to overflowing. The reason given by various landladies and landwomen was the popularity of the exhibition. "It's a proper must," said one, who read book reviews for the fun of it.

After weary hours of trudging by Charlatan and soaring-bumping-soaring by Hilda, they eventually found one bed, a narrow, single bed.

"This is distressing," said Charlatan.

Hilda giggled. "Lucky I'm so slim," she said, nipping his elbow with her twigs.

Paternally Charlatan stroked her hair. "There *are* fiends," he said thoughtfully. "Tripod was right, there *are* fiends, but whereas he ran from them shuddering and gibbering, a very woman among men, we will advance and face them with radiant visages, confident in our moral rightness and stubborn rectitude. Get into bed, sweet child of nature—though nature tamed by culture's soothing hand," he added hastily.

Excitedly Hilda began to pull off her draperies. Charlatan smiled at her, saying, "You are tired, poor child. Lay your head on the pillow and have no fear. I will be back in five minutes."

In the course of his trudge Charlatan had noticed a theatrical properties shop and thither he now sped. He entered and for a moment stood stunned by false beards and magicians' hats, before he could make out the presence of the shopkeeper, a rotund man wearing a mask of grief.

"A sword!" panted Charlatan, "I want a sword."

Grief answered, "No swords. *Hamlet's* on at the Phoenix Theatre and we're out of swords." He changed his mask to joy. "Have a blunderbuss."

"I don't want a blunderbuss," Charlatan answered pettishly. "I want a sword."

The man assumed lugubrious grief once more. "I have no sword. I said that before. We can't go on like this all night. What period is it? Covenanter, Caribbean or Cavalier? I've a first war howitzer if that will serve."

"I don't want it for any period," shouted Charlatan. "I have to sleep with a young lady."

Grief replied, "Past it meself. But, blinded by passion, you have come to the wrong shop. Mr. Aconite next door sells aphrodisiacs."

"Me blinded with p—?" screamed Charlatan, livid and absolutely incapable of pronouncing the horrid word. "I'll have you know that I need a sword to defy passion!"

"A butcher would do as well," replied grief. He rapidly exchanged for joy. "Here, I've got a nifty little dagger which was used in the castration scene in one of Seneca's tragedies. Sir Henry Irving wielded it himself."

"Quick, quick, give it me," panted Charlatan, by now passionately eager to defy his passion.

He snatched the dagger proffered him by joy, and dashed out of the shop. He came to a sudden stop, turned and dashed back, gabbled, "Forgive me if I was rude! I am beside myself! I am seeking salvation!" He turned and fled.

It was a poor, ineffective dagger that Charlatan had snatched, despite Sir Irving's operation. It was well-shaped but it was made of rubber and therefore dagged badly. But it was not for dagging he required it.

Back at the lodgings he stripped himself delicately and then drew back the bedclothes. He gazed tenderly at the tiny form of Hilda. He was relieved to find that she wore her underclothes.

Carefully laying the dagger in the middle of the bed, he popped in beside her and courageously turned his bottom towards her. Thus far and no farther, demon, he addressed

his libido. Between that fair vessel and thy bestial desires lies the keen blade of purity. Advance at thy peril.* He went to sleep quickly, the sleep of the exhausted and the just. Hilda lay awake expectantly for half the night, sighing impatiently and finally exclaiming with disappointment, thus: Oh come on, what are you doing, it will soon be morning. When she heard Charlatan snoring she began to cry. Then she thought of Brute. She leaped from bed and looked out of the window. Her fevered imagination saw Brute below, looking up, spreading his arms in invitation. She jumped with a cry of fulfilment. She landed in a garbage can. We hear no more of her. Charlatan slept on. He dreamt that Chastity mated with International Harmony and gave birth to lots of little Committees for stopping war. Then he woke up, feeling something was wrong. That was it. Chastity never mated, it wasn't her line of duty. But how could the little committees for stopping war be born if someone didn't conceive them? He shifted, and jumped out of bed when the point of the dagger stuck in his rear. Where was he? What was he doing? The exhibition! The ideals room! Picklewit, Päperjacket, honest Snagg! Hilda, dissipation, the Pole! Hilda! He was fully awake! It was light! Where was she? He groped like a blind man who has lost sixpence. He tore the clothes from the bed. No. Impossible. Where was she? Spirited away? Hilda! He cupped his mouth and called Hilda! but all that happened was that the vibration caused an engraving by Ruskin Spear to fall from the wall. He was demented. He was beside himself. He looked in a mirror. It wasn't him. Who was he? He had lost identity. He thought of all the possibilities. Sir Alfred Munnings. No. Lindwall. No. Quintus Brute. No no no. General Bedell Smith. No. Malenkov. No. André Malraux. No. Then he realised that it was useless to go on in this way. There were too many people. He clutched his breast, then his stomach. Yes, he knew what it was. Dementia praecox. Visions. Lack of reality. He stumbled to the door. A fat lady stood there, holding a tray.

* How few men of this calibre remain to us these days.

"Ere you are, sir," she said, in comfortable tones. "I eard you callin. Ere's Shredded Wheat, bacon and eggs, a pot of tea and the *Daily Whatsname*. Where's your wife?"

"Woman," he howled, "I am wedded to misfortune. She is gone. My wife, I mean. No, she is not my wife. Misfortune."

"You're not married, you mean?" the dear old soul enquired. "There's a lot like that these days, don't know that I old with it meself, but times change and I need to let the room. Yer see, I lost me usband at sea."

"Yes, yes," said Charlatan impatiently, pushing her out of the room. "Forgive me," he shouted after her as she disappeared over the banister, "I am beside myself. I am seeking salvation."

He was answered by a crash. A vulgar woman, he thought, then checked himself. Perish all uncharitable thoughts, he said to himself.

He looked at the tray, saw the egg and cried, "Oh baleful eye, houndest thou me even yet? And the wheat that is shredded, knowest thou the agony of the lacerated heart? Oh my soul, it is spiritual pabulum thou needst."

He was carrying on in this way when his eye suddenly saw a headline in the paper: PICKLEWIT SURROUNDED. He snatched the paper and read words that continued the laceration of his heart. "Picklewit and his murderous culture thugs escape in pantehnicon . . . Horse Guards give chase . . . Sir Springthorpe's daughter abducted by hooligan . . . Twenty-five shillings on Charlatan's head. . . ." Nonsense of that kind!

He reeled back. So it had come to this. His brave comrades trapped on Dartmoor, fighting it out to the last drop of Snagg's blood. And he here, in a London lodging room. What would they think of him? How bitterly would their containers turn to their erstwhile companion, while dum-dum bullets spat through the walls of the pantehnicon and atom bombs exploded all around them! He could imagine Picklewit turning to Stodge and saying, "Just for a handful of silver he left us," and Stodge grunting, as he peered along his sights, "We must get rid of such renegades if the world is to be safe

for porridge." Probably at this very moment Dean, dear, lovable Dean, was constructing a webbing statue which he would label Portrait of a Traitor! He, Charlatan, whose dearest wish was to die fighting for ideals.

And the other libel, that he had abducted that poor, misled damsel, Hilda Houri, or Hilda Springthorpe as he must now think of her. He, who had done more for her salvation than any other man. He, who had warned her against Brute. He, who had begged Picklewit not to whip her so cruelly. He, who had actually bought a dagger to keep her safe from his own ardent nature.

He paced up and down the room, his container a ferment of Vactist images. So this was the end. Cornered, dishonoured, without even the benison of his comrades' company. He suddenly collapsed on the bed and cried so violently that the bedsprings broke and he fell through the middle. Then he sat up as a plan formulated. He would not die in vain. He would leave a message to the world. The world should know how he had suffered, and pass on his *cri de coeur* until someone, in some distant century, should read it and say, A miracle of Angst! Charlatan the sufferer! The man who had died a thousand spiritual deaths while his comrades merely fizzled out physically!

He tore some paper off the wall, took out his pen and scribbled, Hear Ye, Children of Darkness! Then he sucked his pen for five minutes. The emotions positively galloped through his breast but it wasn't so easy to lasso them and get them under control.

At last he began: "Dear M. Mauriac, Je vous prie . . ." but then he stopped. Really, his French wasn't good enough. After another five minutes he had another idea, and began again: "Dear Mr. Greene, I am a weevil between cat's paws. I am the little ounce of guilt that sands the sugar. I am the virus that sours the milk. I am he who, though faithful, is deemed unfaithful. I am the brave man who gibbers with fear. I am the coward who is locked out by God. I require the prayers of my family and receive the kicks of a generation. There is no hope for me and yet I am denied despair. Despair

is a luxury and I am beyond luxury. I am beyond all things, even those that God has not created. I am doomed to watch while . . ."

He was about to write "while others die," when he turned his head to sneeze and there, lying on the floor, he saw the dagger. Doomed to watch? What nonsense! So long as he was armed, he was not helpless. Why, there was no limit to what a man could do, armed with a dagger and the spirit of determination. He rose to his feet, took a pace forward, stopped, considered, clenched his fists, stooped, picked up the dagger, straightened up and cried, "To arms! Let heart not fail nor blood run cold, brave Picklewit! Charlatan comes!" And, believe it or not, a moment later he was in the street marching bravely in the direction where he thought the pantehnicon might be.

It is man's greatest glory that men such as Charlatan still exist. When his world seemed to be in ruins, he could still be stirred by feelings of loyalty towards his beleaguered companions.

Many people that day noticed a pale young man, grasping a rubber dagger, striding like a young god, his face transfigured by some intense inner vision, down Portobello Road. He himself saw nothing except the glory that lay ahead. Already, in his container, he visualised the unbelieving expressions, tinged with love and admiration, on the faces of his friends as he arrived unexpectedly in camp, his clothes perhaps daubed with the blood of troopers, possibly a bandage round his temples, even an arm missing. He could see Picklewit gulping with emotion, trying desperately to keep up the pretence that he had no feelings; Snagg's broad honest face suffused in smiles as he exclaimed, "Well, blow me gasket if it ain't Mr. Charlatan, bless is rubber tyres!"; Stodge gratefully offering him a packet of his porridge oats: Päper-jacket booming, "Tis a victory over loost, me lads"; and Dean, his mouth full of webbing, shaking his head and making gulping noises of welcome. Ah, scene charged with more than human pathos!

It took some time before Charlatan realised that someone

was walking at his side. Charlatan stopped, peered and said : "Er—haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"I'm Crampon Bite. Watched your little cultural Bowel Movement from the start. Knew you'd get in heavy trouble. Where are you going, into hiding?"

"To the assistance of my comrades in distress," replied Charlatan loftily.

"Why?" spat Bite.

"This is no time for joking," said Charlatan. "Picklewit is being murdered."

"Natural end. No finesse."

"He needs help, not cynicism, my dear sir. At this time battle has probably been joined. That gallant band no doubt staggers beneath an overwhelming preponderance of——"

"Preponderance of poppycock," snapped Bite. "Did you say fight? Where? Who are you going to kill?"

Charlatan groaned. He suddenly realised how vast was their task. He had read it in the paper: Horse Guards, Metropolitan Police, First Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment, the Boy Scouts, a token force from the Foreign Legion and three squadrons of the R.A.F. "I—I think," he stammered, "it's going to be pretty near everyone."

Bite gave him a sharp look. "Why didn't you say so? I just can't wait to join you."

Charlatan's eyes grew moist. "Honest Bite——" he began, but Bite cut him short. "Stow it," he said crudely, "there's work to be done." Then he glanced up and said: "Ah, MacReady: one of culture's foremost nits."

Across the road came another of that brave old Vacuist Group. Ah, how fortune had scattered them to the four corners of the earth—Charlatan and Picklewit on their mission, Ponce in Fleet Street, Pieter van Pigge curing bacon down in Wilts, Sturgeon faking deep-sea pictures by photographing through the sides of an aquarium in Finchley. . . .

Bite seized his hand, blew smoke in his eyes and said: "Get your running shoes on MacReady, there's going to be a fight. Charlatan is about to advance like Sir Galahad upon the foe. You'll join us, naturally?"

Charlatan beamed. "I see it, I see it," he cried. "The Vacuist Relief Army. We're recruiting it on the spot. How many brave fellows there must be who are eating their hearts out in inaction, not knowing where to go to enlist to help our cause." He turned round, spread wide his arms and called to the fishmongers' and newsagents' shops which lined the street, "Join the Vacuist Relief Army! Leave your chattels and seek immortality! Forgo your wives today that you may spend Sunday afternoons with them in cultured dignity! You, too, can be a hero! Your lives need not be grey and dull, they can be symphonies of action and sonnets of feeling! Join the Vacuist Relief Army!"

Now while Charlatan was carrying on in this manner Bite was urging Sturgeon to join up and do a bit of killing, just to lighten the unbearable squalor of their lives. But when Sturgeon heard the word "killing" he turned green and widdled down his trouser leg.

"What a pity," he answered. "Just my luck. My word, I'd like to get my hands on the throat of one or two customers I can think of. But it's no good. I've promised to go five fathoms down off the Azores this afternoon to photograph a Blackfinned Genetunnyfish. God, I wish I could get out of it, but the plane leaves in half an hour."

"Cold feet?" sneered Bite.

"Now really, Crampon, that wasn't friendly. Look, I'll show you my feelings about it. I'll let you have this Addled Stringbat, a very rare creature which is only found in the Persian Gulf on Tuesdays and Fridays. But be very careful. It's colorific and it'll bite your nose off soon as look at it."

He thrust a brown paper parcel into Bite's knobbly hands and jumped into a taxi (the first Vacuist that had ever been able to afford one, which shows he was doing well). Bite curiously unwrapped the parcel and saw a fish, undoubtedly dead (for some years, judging by the smell) and all around it a green glow, emanating from its gills. Bite was about to throw it aside when he saw a ticket on which was written: "Poison. Not to be taken. Only to be used on enemies."

Bite immediately grasped the value of such a weapon under

the present circumstances. Tucking the fish under his arm, he set off at a quick pace, leaving Charlatan to appeal for volunteers with enormous unsuccess.

It was half way through the afternoon when Bite overtook the armoured columns that were pursuing the pantech-nicon. Most of them had engine trouble and he had found it quite easy to pass them, but then he came to a solid wedge of Horse Guards, looking confident and military in their wonderful shiny breast-plates. Try as he might, he could not force a way through the horses' legs. They stood flank to flank, and every time Bite approached them he was wiped across the face with a tail. His ponderous container dwelt on this for a while, then a crafty smirk cracked his features. He unwrapped the fish and swung it round his head, like a priest swinging a censer. Green fumes floated away and laid a gentle film over the Horse Guards, horses and all. The moment came when each man realised that his beautiful breast-plate no longer shone. Gazing at his neighbour's normally dazzling exterior, he saw nothing but a dreary brown smudge. Useless to attempt to wipe it off, the plates were hopelessly tarnished. When a sergeant-major saw this he turned purple and roared, "Shine them plates!" but it didn't matter how much he shouted and how many men he put on a charge, they couldn't get them plates clean. Then the colonel passed by and fainted. The horses began to rear and finally the order "Back to Barracks" had to be given. In this way Bite was able to slip through and take the auriferous Stringbat to the pantech-nicon, where it helped swell a pathetically small arsenal, thus : swell.

By now Charlatan had finished his recruiting speech. He turned round, saw Bite had gone, said "Bless my soul," and set out to follow him. This is the saddest part of our whole story. It began to rain. The further Charlatan went the deeper he sank in mud until at last he could not move. He stood in mud up to the armpits and looked for all the world like a turnip that has unexpectedly sprouted a human head and a couple of long stringy leaves.

Addressing the moon, Charlatan called, "Oh thou who

watchest our actions with godlike disinterest, I call thee to witness my despair. I have attempted much and achieved nothing. I cannot live while my friends die. It was a bold adventure. May posterity see fit to commend us. May our children—alas, unborn—continue the struggle.” He stopped, not knowing how to continue. Then he said, unexpectedly, “I die.”

He stabbed himself with the rubber dagger but it merely buckled. He drew it across his throat but it merely tickled. Then in a frenzy he thrust it repeatedly at his temples, but so furious was the onslaught that it bounded out of his hand and came to rest in a cowpat twenty yards away. The tears streamed down his face and he nearly choked with chagrin. At last he grew quiet and stood there, absolutely motionless, contemplating existence. Then, wonderingly, he said, “And yet there may be hope! Can it be that I am immortal?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

*In which the sound of ghostly handsteps
creeps across the moor*

THE OLD MOOR lay like a discarded almanack beneath a sagging lead-coloured smother of mournful cloud. Among the bracken, heather and boulders, and in the deep and ferny dells lay Horse Guards polishing their tarnished breast-plates with pocket wash-leathers. On a rocky hump camouflaged with webbing stood the besieged pantechnicon. Within this holed, unholy, battered fortress Dean and Picklewit stood gazing sombrely down at the forlorn scatter of ammunition which was all that remained between them and annihilation. Both were weary, round-shouldered, grubby, unshaven, wild-eyed, their manes shaggy, their trousers baggy, their expressions sour, drawn and determined.

"Fifty rounds for the webbing guns and five d'ed porridge bombs," Picklewit said. "How much filthy food have we got left, Stodge?"

The sculptor turned with a beam of innocent idiocy from the stove where he rolled like a forgotten cheese, cooking porridge. "Filthy? Dash it, mouse-droppings improve good oatmeal if cooked with élan and a dash of Marmite," he said reprovingly. "We've two pounds of the nourishing mess which makes a great nation what it is and half a can of water which looks most appetising, full of enchanting wee insects each with hundreds of little tickly legs. I do wish it would rain, though, then we could catch some in our webbing

buckets and in a day or two might all be able to widdle again—what joy, what bliss!”

“Can’t stand much more of that bleedin porridge,” growled Snagg, who was slumped in a corner tinkering with concentrated hostility at the transmitting set. “Fouls me plugs. Sticks up me valves. Like eating frogs with cement inside em. Orrible.”

“I bridle at that,” Stodge mooned in a hurt tone. “I’m cut to the quick, dask it.”

“You’ll be cut to the dead soon, before you can eat two helpings, like the rest of us,” Picklewit said in a tired voice. “One more attack and we can roll up our mats like Kai Lung.”

“No,” Dean said, expressing his agreement in the only way he knew. He slung on his webbing knapsack with a bitter, defeatist air.

Päperjacket’s enormous voice boomed like a Swiss alpenhorn from his watch position in the stiffened-webbing redoubt at the foot of the knobby hillock. “Relief force on the way up, General.”

A thunderous knockety bong on the tin webbing-reinforced door shook the pantechnicon like a papier mâché telephone pole in a raving nor’easter.

Snagg bolted upright like a performing seal on its tail. “Don’t *do* that,” he roared, and tugged open the webbing-reinforced etc. with a sprawling and dramatic flurry.

A miasmic smoky light entered the pantechnicon followed by a gaunt, emaciated, bony slice of humanity who seemed to be bearing in his arms a luminous smell.

“What the bloodyell do you mean by backfiring like that?” Snagg shouted. “Me nerves has got wheel-wobble.”

“Hold this,” snapped Crampon Bite, and plunged the decaying poison fish in Joe’s horrified arms. Its huge phosphorescent jaws opened and closed automatically clip-clap crunch and Snagg bellowed and billowed back with a devastated expression, gripping his left arm and hooting like an owl. “It bit me!” he bassooned. “I’ve been bit to death by a perishing kipper!”

The fish lay on the floor where it had fallen, coated with a sinister glistening lustre like witch's oil.

"Don't worry, the rest of you," Bite said briskly. "It won't eat you, it only affects the righteous." He made a ghastly snapping sound which may have been a laugh. "It tarnishes breast-plates and causes diarrhoea. We got it from Sturgeon MacReady. Cover it up if it scares you."

Dean dropped a slice of webbing over the hideous sea-blemish.

"Who *are* you?" said Picklewit, with weary distaste, as if tired of the jokes of some over-insistent comic.

"Crampon Bite, relief force."

"How can we be sure you're not a Handonose spy or a container packed with disease germs?"

"Nobody can be sure of anything except nothing," Bite replied unhesitatingly.

"A good Vacuist maxim," Dean said approvingly.

"Hmmm," said Picklewit. "Who sent you?"

"I am never sent. I come. Charlatar was to accompany me but failed to get through. Too soft for this world. Still has emotions. A wilting lily."

Huge feet thumped the ground and Päperjacket's long eary face loomed abruptly in the doorway. "Ay," he tromboned richly, "a great loosty light it was like decaying pornography in soome loathsome old library mouldering oonder e soon of hoodliness, ay a great light meandering over the heather like soome mighty portent of Doom to Coome. A great cosmic flounder. A wonderful apocalyptic hake. A sight to give they Orse Guards oompy, mark my words. God has sent a cod to disrupt the forces of the Philistines."

"Did you notice the enemy's dispositions?" Picklewit asked Bite.

"Shoot em not count em, that's my motto," Bite cracked back with a flinty smile. "You've got no chance. Surrounded. Hemmed in. Crushed like a nut. Bulwers sent for. Tanks rolling up. Whole country's against you. Sympathisers driven underground. Surrender's useless—you'd be hung anyway."

"Ere! Cut it out!" brayed Snagg, leaving off sucking his

wound in order to vent his alarm. "First you get me bitten by your ruddy pet lobster then you tell me I'll be strung up like Crippen just for finding meself a job with a gang of culture cranks and minding me own business and keeping me pantehnicon on the road. It's not fair. It's a foul. I appeal to the divine ref., that's what I do. This Picklewit blighter needs a good hanging, I don't deny that, but there's blokes as never said an ill word in their lives, and that's old Joe Snagg for one, always ready to give an elping and to any old mechanical wreck as lies by the roadside stripped by robbers. I'm innocent, I swear it. Besides, I'm ill, I'm in pain, they can't hang an ill man, it wouldn't be decent, I'm in proper fuming agony, and you just stand there nattering like a lot of sparrows in a dungheap. It's not right, so it isn't, that it's not. Send for a doctor. Send for a mechanic."

"There, there, there, poor fellow," Stodge said kindly and slapped on a steaming porridge poultice which was to have served for their evening meal, so hot it sent Snagg dancing out on the hillside like an enraged ape. Ping! Whooce! Slam! He dived inside again. "The dirty swine!" he roared. "They shot at me! Me, poor old Joe Snagg. The scum! What have I ever done to the perishing Orse Guards?" He flopped down on a bunk and closed his eyes. . . .

No attack came that night, though the man on watch could see the Horse Guards' fires flickering on the heath and the yellow headlights of lorries swinging along distant roads as massive convoys converged on their beleaguered hump.

At 6.30 the following evening the Free Vacuist Radio came on the air for the first and last time with an introductory announcement by a blue-faced, twitching, red-eyed Picklewit. "Hello hello, Porps, Free Vacuist Radio calling the world. Lay down your breast-plates Horse Guards, your position is hopeless. Guatemalan Irregulars are massing on your left flank. Hordes of ants are climbing up inside your tin trousers. The Cubists have taken London by storm. Twenty critics have been stoned in Whitehall. England has beaten Hungary 10-nil. Flying saucers have landed and sorcerers disguised as doves are floating even now above your positions letting

fly with streams of poisoned detritus. Ketchup guns cover your lines of retreat and your porps are porps. The earth is in danger of jellification. Entropy is rampant, the sea is slowly turning to glue. Time has gone sour, women have all turned back to front, beer tastes of webbing. Hang on to those kidneys, policemen, our kidney-magnets are levelled, and within the hour your organs won't play any more. What will Sandy Macpherson do then? Watch your livers, they'll soon be deaders. Look out for gazboldrifiers, they know five hundred disguises and may get into your soup. Swallow one and your legs turn to syrup. Beware of atomic toads, explosive bully-beef, minced latrines, poisoned porridge and the Colonel with the lethal moustache. He is in the pay of your enemies, and will shoot gravy all over your breast-plates. Can you trust your officers? Can they trust you? Can you trust your wife when she isn't trussed up? Can she trust you? Trooper Smith, your daughter has gone off with a Wop. Trooper Jones, your potato crop has eye-disease and its troth has been blighted. Go home and see to your insurance policies. They are all running out. What are you all doing here? What are you doing anywhere? What day is it? Who was that porps I saw you with last night? When? Where? Whither? Whence? What? Whuffo? Porps. Porps was that porps. The porpseyed porps are down, the wall broken and all porps are porps for evermore." He collapsed exhausted.

"Best speech I ever heard," Bite said, the first compliment he had ever uttered.

"Now," Stodge told the listening world. "Forces, here is your sweetheart." Crampon Bite blew a gargantuan raspberry straight from the bush.

"We are now broadcasting," fluted Stodge with innocent aplomb, "a brief account of our Peace Programme, the Dartmoor Five-Point Charter." Stodge's own wailing tones continued:

"1. Every man must be granted the inalienable right to dress from head to foot in National Health Porridge."

Päperjacket boomed: "2. Loost moost be abolished and replaced by reading, weeding and eurhythmics."

Bite bit : "3. Everything of any consequence must be overthrown."

"4. Except webbing," contributed Stodge on behalf of sentry Dean.

And finally, 5. Picklewit gave a disgusted verbal shrug, thus : Shmoofsh.

Snagg groaned, tossing and floundering on his bunk like a gaffed fish. "I'm dying," he grumbled, "and you go yipping and yapping instead of appealing over the radio for the Red Cross, the A.A., the R.A.C. and the B.M.A. to save me from the scrapyard. Get a surgeon. Get a nurse. Get Florence Ruddy Nightingale."

"You," said Crampon Bite, "are just dung on the soil of time, Snagg, and as such have your uses. You're dying because you don't know any better, which is just as well, because you would die anyway."

"But I don't want to die!" shouted Snagg, exasperated beyond endurance vile. "I don't *want* to know any better. Dying's not in my line. I'm a simple bloke, I am, I've got simple bloody tastes. Help!"

Bite ignored him as a stone ignores rain. "Dean's dying for webbing, Stodge is dying for porridge, Päperjacket to prove that Loost's Doom, but what are *you* dying for, Picklewit?" He gazed at our surviving hero with a glint of bitter delight in his granitic peepers. For the first time in his life Picklewit was baffled. He snorted and porped angrily. "That blasted Charlatan," he said. "A bloke who'd like nothing better than to die for some idiotic ideal or other, he's managed to slope off to safety and is probably sitting swigging tea with five teaspoonsful of sugar and gorging down rock buns in some luxurious A.B.C. while I, who don't want to die for anything, I'm tied up tight in a tin parcel addressed to Doom and Destruction. Huh." He gave the table-leg a malevolent kick. "It must be some kind of joke, I suppose. What are you dying for, Bite?"

"Fun," said Crampon Bite and barked a slaty laugh.

A burst of firing and a ragged scream sounded from the moor.

Bite, Päperjacket and Picklewit seized their guns and plunged down the hill, leaving Stodge and the delirious Snagg to guard the pantechnicon. They scrabbled over sharp-edged rocks, splashed through blithering brooks, holliped over tufty tripping grasses and tough elastic heather towards the wriggly webbing defences on a platform above which glowed The Fish, emitting its weird, insidious light. The sun was dragged back into a thick mass of bruise-coloured cloud, and darkness crept swiftly from the ground, closing its arms about them in sinister silence. The Redoubt was empty.

"Help! Help!" Was that Jonathan Dean's tortured, despairing voice appealing from the rocky recesses of the moor?

"This is it," said Bite. "And why not?" They vaulted the webbing barricades like electric kangaroos and charged towards their captured friend.

"There they are, the foul harbingers of universal Doom!" thundered Päperjacket, waving his nose at a nearby copse. Flittering among the trees one two three four flashes of white, flickered and were gone, a brief suggestion of flowing robes, white burnouses, gleaming eyes. . . . Pang. Whooeece. A bullet whined away, deflected by Päperjacket's webbing shield. All three flopped on their bellies in the ooze.

"Dean! Jonathan! Where are you?" Picklewit shouted. Only the echo of his voice replied.

Glancing back with feverish, heavy-lidded eyes Picklewit found the hump and the pantechnicon hidden by enveloping darkness. "We're done for now," he said, shivering with cold fever.

Bite gave a gritty laugh. "It was a trap," he said. "Obvious from the start; but what does it matter? We jumped right into it. That's what comes of unselfishness. Dean was razored hours ago."

Picklewit was seized with remorse and shame that *he* should have stumbled out in a blind effort to save the life of a webbing-obsessed friend when he could have remained behind a solid barricade defending his own life with the sober care it deserved.

"There! The apostles of devouring loost! I see them,

gleaming in the gloaming, their passionate soother eyes!" Päperjacket bounded to his feet before they could stop him and firing wildly as he went the unhinged and shatterpated librarian leapt and hurdled off among the hussocks, hummocks, tussocks, hassocks, tummocks, tassocks, hammocks, Hassetts and Hootons towards the straggling fringe of birches. Pong! Bing! Yip! Wherreee! Whieecooooeee! Pap! Päperjacket pitched forward and lay still.

"Dean! Jonathan! Where are you?" Picklewit called again, desperately, entreatingly into the ghostly snuffle of silence. He longed for human contact, dreading to be alone with the flinty and derisive Bite. Nothing. A lonely and eroded moor. Time widdling by. Doom. The blue evening thickened into dark relieved only by the ghostly flickering emanation of phosphorescent gangrene from the horrible Fish which seemed to swell and float like some strange aerial monster above the world of violence, an awful symbol of universal entropy, its green and yellow vapours performing an awesome dance of death in the still, imponderable air. Eyes gleamed and died, gleamed and died. Were they real or but the phantasms caused by unutterable weariness? Picklewit no longer knew, no longer cared. . . .

Faint phantom snuffles and the light pad pad of hand-steps whispered across the moor. . . .

"It's not the Horse Guards this time," Bite remarked. "These boys have a taste for eunuchs. Have a cigar."

Picklewit shook his haggard head. His hand, bloodless and ghostly in the livid fish-light, crept towards the breast pocket of his coat as if seeking for the comfort of some token of the past, some faded flower, some letters tied in ribbon, some cherished snapshot of a smiling daughter or a loving wife, a little son, a half-forgotten unforgetting mother, some consolation dug from the drifting sands of time gone by. Ah no. His hand slowly slowly fell away. No snapshots there, no tender memories, no record of a close affection, no, no sweet and tender ties, no recollections of a warm compassionate care to clutch against his heart, only the Vacuist vision of a hilly desert of disreputable days.

With a spine-chilling owl-like clarity a hollow brown voice
hooted across the spaces of the dark :

The end has come, hang up your boots
And sing the final psalm,
You die, and no one cares two hoots—
Farewell, Maa es Salaam.

The two men stared into one another's grim, despairing
eyes; their hands joined in a long grip of stony comradeship.
Then Crampon Bite drew from his pocket a small potato gun.

GLOSSARY OF DIFFICULT TERMS

Abacus	the detritus of past novels, found within.
Bird	a winged custard.
Chandler	a genius, who invented that annual international marathon, the Hadley Chase.
Death	a grave hereditary disease.
Electricity	a phenomenon, rather difficult to describe.
France	where Sartre lives.
Gestalt	a German word meaning " psychological pudding."
Hero	a contemporary term for " neurotic."
I	me.
Jokes, jolly	see within.
Kale	a form of Scottish cabbage which tastes like webbing.
Lud	a lobby in which it is possible, under certain circumstances, to claim the <i>News Chronicle</i> prize.
Mouse	a wee timorous beastie.
Nous	something Greek.
O	Poetry for " Oh."
Penultimate	the last meeting of the P.E.N. Club.
Q	Queue.
R	Ah in Somerset, Dorset and Wilts.
Sartre	a bored and noisy frog.
T	tea.
U	me.
Vice	a fashionable clamp.
Women	see " Ladies."
Xanthus	antipodal nodes.
You	who cares about you.
Zeno	the originator of the science known as " Cynics."